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MONKSFORD

A TALE

OF MUCH TALKING

MONKSFORD.

VOL. I.

MONKSFORD

A TALE OF MUCH TALKING

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"WISE AS A SERPENT," "WIFE OR SLAVE," ETC.

"Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment
And a babbler is no better."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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MONKSFORD.

CHAPTER I.

WYCHERLEY COURT.

THE town of Monksford stood partly in a valley, partly on a range of low hills, which sheltered that valley from the north. Having had its beginnings in days when land was cheap, and "eligible building sites" not eagerly sought after, it had straggled over ground enough to form the site of a modern town of three times its size. The principal part of the old town had been clustered along the banks of a clear, rapid river, which ran through the valley—more account being taken in days of yore of convenient proximity to water than of miasma and rheumatism. Its main street ran due north from the bridge, straight up the slope, and was flanked on both sides with scattered houses of strangely varied size and shape, but all of a higher class than any of those lying close along

the banks of the river. These houses, indeed, increased in size and importance in proportion as they mounted the slope, seeming to feel called upon to show some good cause why they should look over the heads of their neighbours.

Within comparatively modern times, Monksford had begun to increase and multiply in a most energetic fashion, until at last it had reached the status of a busy and, in its own eyes, very important country town. This change had been brought about by a native of the place, who had gone to India, and rapidly amassed a considerable fortune, in those halcyon days when fortunes were made there, even faster than livers perished. He had returned to his native town rich, dyspeptic, and comparatively young; and being by no means content with the amount of his wealth, had forthwith hit upon the scheme of turning the water-power of the neighbourhood to good account by the erection of large paper-mills close to the town. These mills had prospered amazingly, and been, directly or indirectly, the cause of other advantageous commercial ventures in the neighbourhood.

Monksford had, therefore, rapidly grown in size, and begun to assume a strangely mottled appearance. New lath-and-plaster erections had been dovetailed in among the original old-fashioned dwellings of the lower town; and whole streets of second-rate houses had sprung up near the river. More pretentious buildings, flaunting the reddest of brick and the bluest of slate, had edged themselves in among the sober-tinted occupants of the slope, transforming what had once been known merely as

"the main road" into "the High Street,"—a continuous line of building of very variegated character, extending nearly as far as the church and rectory, which an odd freak had planted at some little distance from the original town.

On the eastern side of the High Street these glittering specimens of modern brickwork had dotted themselves about in excrescences of vivid colour for some distance along the hill side; but it was only eastward the town was able thus to extend itself. Immediately to the west of the High Street lay the park and grounds of Wycherley Court, a fine old English manor house, standing on the site of a long-since perished feudal castle of considerable importance. Indeed, the houses on that side of the street formed a thin fringe of buildings skirting the boundaries of the park, so that all further advance in that direction was impracticable.

The founder of the mills had built himself a large self-asserting brick house, at a short distance from the town, on the other side of the river; had christened it "The Hall;" and had tried to set up as a county man. In this venture he had proved less successful than in his commercial schemes. He lived too near his own mills; was too yellow in complexion for anything save a man who had made his fortune in tropical climates; and could never get rid of a very pronounced provincial accent. Therefore, although he was rich, accounted of consequence, and always held to be the man who had made Monksford, dyspepsia and social failure infused a certain amount of bitterness into his cup; and if he were ever induced to allow that he had been a successful man,

it was always with a certain melancholy cadence, which imparted a distinct ring of negation to the admission.

His only son inherited the mills, and his father's wealth, without his dyspepsia and ambition, and, aiming at less, achieved more. He enlarged the mills, was an energetic promoter and liberal supporter of improvements and beneficial changes in the town, was universally respected, and had held the office of mayor for many years.

Modern Monksford was distinctly a *parvenu*, and like all *parvenus*, complacently exultant over any traces of patrician antiquity, and much ashamed of all which pointed to a humble origin. Over the close proximity of Wycherley Court, with its fine massive old gateway, the original entrance to the enclosure of the ancient castle, and now opening absolutely into the High Street, it extremely glorified itself; the qualifying drop of gall in its cup being the humble dwellings of the older town, and especially two or three low, thatched, time-worn cottages, which flanked the Wycherley gateway on each side. These cottages were a perpetual eyesore to the wealthier portion of the population, and above all to Mr. Moss, whose "Italian Warehouse" had supplanted "the grocer" of Monksford's humbler days. Many years since he had secured a piece of vacant ground, exactly opposite the gateway, on singularly advantageous terms, by, it was declared, rather sharp practice, and had built thereon a pretentious brick house, with a startling frontage of shop-window, displaying all the latest improvements in rolling shutters, and unlimited plate glass. He had

done a thriving business, and been naturally denounced by disappointed candidates for his advantageous bargain, as little better than a swindler, who had dropped a suggestive "e" out of his name, to conceal its origin; and who owed his success in business to extensive adulteration. He was reported to be one of the richest men in Monksford, and to have exalted municipal aspirations.

To Mr. Moss's spirit, attuned to universal newness, those "low tenements," as he styled the humble cottages aforesaid, were a grievous vexation; and when he became a member of the town council, he forthwith began a perpetual agitation to procure their removal.

"Our High Street," he constantly affirmed, "would be as picturesque a thing as you could see in any country town in England, but for those low buildings."

Monksford in general shared his sentiments, and strong pressure was put upon Mr. Huddlestone, the mayor, to call a meeting to consider what steps would be most advisable, with a view to the removal of this great blot upon the glittering newness of Monksford.

Mr. Huddlestone convened the meeting, in deference to the wishes of his municipal brethren, but he did it under protest. To Mr. Moss, who, labouring under a secret conviction that these obnoxious neighbours were detrimental to him from a business point of view, naturally displayed more of what is usually termed "public spirit" in the matter than any one else, he openly expressed his opinion.

"I am not sure that we should gain by the removal of those old houses. To my thinking we have too much new brick-work as it is about Monksford. But waiving that point, it is a simple waste of time to discuss the matter. Nothing could be done without Mr. Wycherley's consent."

"That might be obtained."

"Highly improbable. Mr. Wycherley, as you know, never comes near the place; and I know, if you do not, that he rarely answers a letter on business, even if important to himself. He is little likely to give any heed to such a matter as this."

"A memorial might be drawn up. Mr. Wycherley could hardly, I imagine, entirely neglect a memorial forwarded officially by the town council of Monksford."

The mayor smiled. He had been educated abroad, his dyspeptic father having had liberal ideas on such points. His estimate of the importance of the town council of Monksford was therefore a somewhat different one from the speaker's, and probably approached much nearer to that of Mr. Wycherley.

"I do not think you will gain much by that move," he replied. "However, the meeting can be held. It will be only a little time wasted, which might have been better employed. There is that drainage question—"

The drainage question as yet only affected certain low streets lying near the river. Mr. Moss promptly declared his firm conviction that a great deal of unnecessary fuss was made about the matter,

that the houses were only unhealthy because the people were dirty, and that he did not see why the funds of the corporation should be wasted in effecting improvements for people whose habits would inevitably undo all that was done for them.

The meeting was held. The injurious effect to Monksford's resplendent High Street of the presence of antiquity in such an objectionable form was duly set forth, a memorial was drawn up, and was forwarded to Mr. Wycherley through his steward. It remained, as the mayor had predicted, entirely unnoticed. The corporation had undoubtedly wasted their time, and Mr. Moss began darkly to descant upon the blindness of the English gentry to the lessons set forth in the French Revolution.

Yet Mr. Moss might have applied a balm of Gilead to his irritated feelings, had he possessed capabilities of appreciating the soothing qualities of that which circumstances daily offered for his use. True there lay stretched out before him the thatched roofs, small latticed windows, and general exterior shabbiness of the humble witnesses to Monksford's vanished days of commercial insignificance. But in the midst of them, exactly opposite to his plate glass windows, was the grand old gateway of which the town declared itself to be proud. There, sublimely indifferent alike to its humble companions, and to the new-born smartness of modern Monksford, stood the grey old pile, its massive archway surmounted by a timeworn carving of the Wycherley coat of arms, and through that archway, with its heavy iron gates. Mr. Moss could at any moment look along a perfect avenue of ancient elms, stretch-

ing straight forward up a slight incline to where, at nearly a quarter of a mile's distance, it appeared to end abruptly in a mass of foliage.

But on the subject of this gateway, Mr. Moss was secretly at issue with the, at least, declared sentiments of his fellow townspeople, though he held his peace, being perfectly aware that it was "the right thing" to admire such a well preserved remnant of feudal days, although he could not in heart arrive at such a capability. His private opinion was that, failing the unattainable improvement of sweeping away the whole "mouldy old structure," and replacing it with light, handsome iron gates, well touched up with gilding, and a picturesque lodge in the Swiss cottage style, the only fitting course was to have the whole fabric thoroughly cleaned and chiselled up into sharpness of outline, but he did not express it. He endured with outward complacency the admiration he despised, and secretly marvelled at the folly which had allowed those fine elms to stand until picturesque old age had ruined their market value, instead of converting them into hard cash while they were in their prime. He looked upon the fallen fortunes of the family as a well-merited retribution upon such headstrong infatuation.

For a fallen family the Wycherleys had been; since, many years ago, the then representative of a long line of ancestors, had gone abroad in the full tide of a reckless, dissipated youth, and there married a very beautiful Frenchwoman, of not too correct antecedents. She had come once to Wycherley Court, had volubly proclaimed her horror

of the gloomy old den, and had forthwith departed, to return no more.

From that day, forward, the place had remained silent and deserted. Rents were as sharply collected, as grudgingly paid, when never a sixpence came back in the shape of necessary repairs, or estate improvement. A gay, reckless life, amidst Parisian extravagance and German gambling places, left no margin in the Wycherley revenues, never very large, for any outlay on behalf of the just claims of tenants, or for the keeping up of the house and grounds.

At length a rumour reached the neighbourhood that Mr. Wycherley was dead. They loved to hear some new thing in Monksford; and though news of the death of a dissipated non-resident lord of the manor lacked the choice flavour of damaging innuendo, or malicious slander, it was still worth something, especially as it opened the door for much speculation, Mr. Wycherley being known to have left an only son.

Mrs. Tatnell, the widow of the late principal doctor in the town, was the happy first recipient of the news, and she forthwith sped, as fast as corpulence and an asthmatic tendency would allow, to impart the intelligence to, and indulge in endless conjecture with, Miss Bradley, the bachelor rector's lady housekeeper, a distant relative of his own, who vigilantly watched over his domestic interests.

She was one of the race which, by comparison, may be called harmless gossips. She was never ill-natured, and inflicted no worse injury upon her

neighbours than is inseparable from discussing their affairs with less guileless specimens of the class. On the present occasion, Miss Bradley was not, however, disposed to grant her friend much licence in the matter of speculation and discussion. Mrs. Tatnell had secured prior intelligence, through the fortunate accident of possessing a friend at Homberg, where Mr. Wycherley had died from a sudden attack of fever. Still it was possible some one else might be similarly favoured by fortune, and Miss Bradley's friendship was not proof against the possibility that the waste of precious moments might be fatal to her own chances of being first with the news in other quarters. She let Mrs. Tatnell get as far as the probable return of young Mr. Wycherley to live at the Court; his inevitable profligacy; the certain demoralisation of the neighbourhood through periodical influxes of abandoned Frenchmen, and the perpetual presence of dissolute men servants; but when she was proceeding to discuss the question of his ultimate marriage, and the likelihood of his seeking an alliance with this or that family in the county, Miss Bradley cut her short, rising to the occasion in all the virtuous severity of the model housekeeper. She could not, she declared, spare time for friendly chatting at that hour; the rector expected two friends to dinner; she must look to her preparations, and take counsel betimes with the cook.

Mrs. Tatnell was not to be thus hoodwinked. She took her departure with a smile on her lips, but with bitterness in her heart; for she was short, stout, and

breathless, while Miss Bradley was tall and thin, with the stride and wind of a greyhound in training. In a trice her bonnet was on, and she was away to her marketing—whisking through a side street, and heading Mrs. Tatnell by a good ten minutes. She had told the news to half-a-dozen people before the latter was visible in the offing, and then she plunged into Mr. Moss's convenient shelter. Mrs. Moss loudly proclaimed in Monksford that Doctor Tatnell had nearly killed her, by entirely misunderstanding, and consequently mistreating, some curious complaint with which she had been afflicted, and which was very mysterious, and quite unlike the usual disorders of suffering humanity; and Mrs. Tatnell had retorted by declaring that Mr. Moss's father had been perfectly well known to some of her relations as "Benjamin Moses;" that she had distinctly detected sloe leaves in the son's best tea, and sand in the brown sugar, and had been obliged in consequence to remove her custom to a rival establishment. So there was war between the houses, and Miss Bradley knew where she was safe.

Mr. Moss was not, as a general rule, visible in the shop. He remained in dignified seclusion in those back regions which he vaguely described as "the counting-house," vigilantly superintending the large and important commercial transactions of the house, and sending off from thence periodical shoals of important looking documents to all parts of the globe—China, India, Demerara, and where not; impressing thereby the young men in his employment with awe, and all Monksford with the belief that the enormous business of Moss & Co. was carried on directly with pro-

ducers, without the intervention of any English wholesale house.

When certain customers made their appearance, Mr. Moss was wont, however, to tear himself from these onerous duties, and strolling forth into the shop—not of course behind the counter—to indulge in a little friendly chat over the news of the day; and manifest the interest becoming in an influential member of the corporation in all which concerned the welfare of Monksford.

He never neglected Miss Bradley. Notwithstanding the insignificance of orders from a bachelor's establishment, he regarded the rector as an important customer. He was a man whose weight in Monksford and the neighbourhood was of that most durable kind which is the result of personal character. Mr. Moss had parochial as well as municipal aspiration, and a change in the parish churchwardenship was looming in the distance.

In this matter he fancied the rector might be indirectly a tower of strength, though he knew he would never interfere directly. At the present moment Mr. Moss's almost only reason for wishing to secure the appointment was a little mortification at having tried for it and failed, some few years since, chiefly, Mrs. Moss declared, through the malice of Mrs. Tatnell, whom she averred her dear husband, were he not an angel of kindness and Christian charity, would have prosecuted for slander. Sloe leaves and sand, indeed! when every one knew she had only made the excuse in order to go and get the nasty cheap teas and sugars which Polson & Potter sold, because she was too stingy to pay for

the first-class goods in which alone men in Mr. Moss's position dealt! More ardent feelings on the church-wardenship question were to be awoke hereafter.

Mr. Moss now came forth smiling, and heard the news.

"Is there good authority for the statement?" he asked. He prided himself on always using correct and well-chosen phrases.

"Mrs. Tatnell has had a letter from a friend in Homberg, where Mr. Wycherley died."

Mr. Moss compressed his lips, smiled gently, and shook his head very slightly.

"You don't mean to say you don't believe it?"

"My dear madam, I make a point of never, if it be possible to avoid it, insinuating any ill report against my neighbours. I shall certainly, however, refrain from repeating this intelligence until I receive corroboration of the truth of the report from some other quarter."

Miss Bradley, nevertheless, discussed the matter for a while with Mr. Moss, dwelling on the alarm she felt lest young Mr. Wycherley should turn out to be a Roman Catholic, which would be such a distressing thing to the poor dear rector. Then she proceeded on her way. And that evening, when Mrs. Tatnell's laundress brought home the clean linen, she told her how she had just heard from Mrs. Polson, that she had had it direct from the parish clerk's wife herself, that Miss Bradley had said to her that Mr. Moss declared he would never believe anything which Mrs. Tatnell even swore to on oath, unless it was confirmed by more than one trustworthy and independent witness. Whereupon Mrs. Tatnell wrote a

reproachful note to Miss Bradley, and Miss Bradley responded with some acrimony about crediting gossiping stories; and for a week or two there was a shade of coolness between the two ladies.

The report was confirmed. Mr. Wycherley was really dead; and thenceforward Mr. Moss kept a vigilant watch upon the old gateway, through which for many a year the sole passers had been the steward, the housekeeper who lived at the Court, and an occasional workman.

At length, after some weeks of patient waiting, the stern motionlessness of events was disturbed by a symptom. The key of the carriage gate was in the charge of a rheumatic old retainer of the Wycherleys, who lived in the cottage immediately flanking the heavy arch.

Forth from her door one morning came that ancient dame, bearing in one hand a broken teacup, from which protruded an unmistakable feather; in the other, the massive key of the entrance gate. Mr. Moss's watchful eye was upon her instantly. He was not in the shop at the moment, but he appeared there immediately, demanding from his foreman the production of some samples of goods which had been sent for his inspection.

Packet in hand, he advanced to the doorway for better light upon a critical examination, and stood there with one eye upon a sample of currants he was supposed to be minutely scanning, the other upon the old woman opposite, busily occupied in oiling the lock, and repeatedly turning the key in it.

"These are very fair goods on the whole," he remarked to the foreman. "I think we will have them.

It is quite a safe house, that is a great point. Dear me, how very infirm that poor old soul over the way is getting!"

And Mr. Moss watched the old gatekeeper, and sighed—a sigh which might be sympathetic with her age and infirmities, or which might be for those departed days of insignificance and freedom, when, clad in a white apron, he had made up parcels of tea and sugar behind his own counter, and would not have hesitated to stroll across the street and chat for a few moments with the object of his attention. Such a step was quite incompatible with the position of Mr. Moss, the wealthy tradesman and town councillor of Monksford. The requirements of dignified position were only to be reconciled with the attainment of information by adroit use of tactics; but Mr. Moss was fully equal to the situation.

"Poor old soul!" he continued, watching her proceedings attentively, "I wonder what she has to live upon?"

"Half-a-crown a-week from the parish, sir," replied one of his shopmen, grinning a little at his master's sudden development of charitable sentiment, "and the cottage and a trifle from Mr. Wycherley."

"Dear, dear! that is very little. I declare she is trying to open the gates, just to see if they will work, I suppose. Robert," and he turned suddenly upon an errand boy just about to start with a basket full of parcels, "run across and work those gates for old Mrs. Jones, and tell her if she will step across I will be happy to give her a little tea and sugar."

The boy sped on his errand; and after watching him swing the gate back and forward a time or two,

the old crone turned the key in the lock, and came hobbling across the street.

"Good morning, Mrs. Jones!" Mr. Moss began; "how's your rheumatism?"

"Eh, what sir? I be main deaf."

Mr. Moss shouted forth his question once more.

"It be terriable bad. Them floors is damp as a bog. It be main hard on an old body," she grumbled.

"Well, you must let me give you a little tea and sugar. Put up a parcel for Mrs. Jones! Half-a-pound of tea and a pound of sugar."

"One and seven!" whispered the man addressed to a comrade. "She's worth all that, if she'll speak!"

"Well, Mrs. Jones," continued the master, "so you've been oiling your gates, I see. They must need it, I think. They don't open often in these days."

"Ay; they be moighty stiff. It's hard on an 'old body."

"Very hard, indeed, I should say. I'm very glad I saw you in time to send the boy over to assist you. And, pray, why are you oiling the gates to-day, Mrs. Jones?"

"Why be I iling 'em? Bless you, why to make 'em run easy, to be sure."

"Yes, yes; I know that. But why are they wanted to turn easily just now?"

"Lor! How should I know? 'Taint no business o' mine. I never axes no questions. I allus minds my own business. When I be tould to ile 'em I iles 'em, and when I baint tould, why I jist lets 'em be. Now, young man, if that ere tea and sugar be ready, I'll thank you to hand it over. I left my kittle jist on the bile; and I don't want to be dawdling here."

Without one word of thanks she clutched her parcel and hobbled away. Mr. Moss retreated somewhat suddenly, and a little chuckle went round the shop, accompanied by a whisper,—

"Done clean out of one and seven! That'll go into some one's bill."

But though thwarted for the moment, Mr. Moss was not foiled. If he could not secure direct information he could at least watch; and that very afternoon his vigilance met its reward. Towards three o'clock, a hired fly drove up the street and stopped at the Wycherley gates.

Mrs. Jones, evidently on the watch, and therefore equally evidently a treacherous recipient of unmerited tea and sugar, came out with the great key; and while she was unlocking the gate, Mr. Moss from the shop, Mrs. Moss from her smart drawing-room overhead, and the servants from the bedroom windows above, all made out that in the fly, with his back to the horses, was seated Mr. Wycherley's steward; and that the opposite seat was occupied by two young men of foreign appearance.

It was passing strange to see how that afternoon all the philanthropy, all the business, and, for the matter of that, all the—shall it be harshly termed idleness? let charity rather substitute—unoccupied leisure of Monksford, was, by some mysterious process of attraction, drawn towards the neighbourhood of the Wycherley Court gateway. Mr. Moss, in bitterness of soul, was forced to the conclusion that, by some unexplained means, some of his neighbours had secured for nothing the information which he had vainly sought to obtain at the cost of the

outlay of one shilling and sevenpence. He could, however, console himself with the reflection that he had been well indemnified. His books would have borne witness to the receipt that afternoon of a sum far above the average for unimportant trifles. Miss Bradley was soon in the field, comfortably settled close to the drawing-room window, with Mrs. Moss, whom she had suddenly resolved to enlighten that afternoon on the subject of clothing, coal, and soup charities, in which, as became the wife of a churchwarden to be, that lady had lately begun to manifest a deep interest. From that vantage ground Miss Bradley smiled a smile of somewhat malicious superiority on her now thoroughly reconciled friend, Mrs. Tatnell, as she saw her diving into the recesses of old Mrs. Jones' damp, smoky den, armed evidently with some creature comforts. She could, it is true, thus sit in dingy squalor closer to the gate than Miss Bradley; but she did not occupy a most luxurious cushioned chair, commanding a full view of the elm avenue.

Numerous gaily dressed damsels were afoot that afternoon, all apparently simultaneously in want of gloves, ties, veils, or similar trifles, and all assuring one another, with seemingly needless fervour, that really on a hot afternoon the High Street was the pleasantest place for a stroll. There was always a shady side, and a sort of draught or something, which made a coolness in the air—and then there was no dust.

The new lord of the manor, meanwhile, a handsome man, of about five-and-twenty years of age,

thoroughly French in all save name, had been driven up the moss-grown, untrimmed avenue, and had disappeared amidst the distant foliage. At the spot where the road appeared to end abruptly in a leafy screen, it crossed a bridge, thrown over what had once been the moat of the castle, but which was now merely a sudden hollow in the park, and turning sharply to the right, led for a short distance through a dense thicket of evergreens, which straggled about in unchecked luxuriance, darkening the damp mouldy road, over which in some places they almost met, and struggling here and there resolutely with heavy growths of creeping plants, which had sprung up unheeded among them, and spread their clinging tendrils vigorously on all sides. After running for about a hundred yards through this chilly wilderness, the road curved again, now to the left, and skirting for a short distance close under the wall of the house, swept suddenly clear of the dense shrubbery on to a broad terrace which ran the whole length of the front of the old manor. The house faced away from Monksford, looking westward over a wide expanse of undulating richly wooded country.

That magnificent prospect, in unaltered beauty of outline and colouring, and the finely timbered park, were the only attractions left by years of neglect to the old manor house, which, with its tastefully laid-out grounds, had been the pride and delight of many generations of Wycherleys.

The house itself had a dreary deserted look, with its smokeless chimneys, and long rows of heavily mullioned, small lattice-paned windows, closely shuttered, and with many a pane of glass gone,

which had been accidentally broken and never repaired. The once smooth, short turf of the terrace was an almost knee-deep tangle of coarse grass. The massive low stone balustrade which edged it was in some places broken, in others overrun by long straggling streamers of ground ivy. The broad stone steps leading down to the formerly brilliant flower garden below, were stained and moss grown, and strewn with remnants of the shattered stone vases which, of yore, filled with bright-hued flowers, had adorned the balustrade. The garden beneath was an absolute wilderness of rank vegetation, where weeds of every sort fought for possession of the soil with the few remnants of hardier kinds of flowers and shrubs which still struggled for existence amid the universal desolation. Here a group of straggling lilies shot up their tall stems amidst a luxurious growth of groundsel and dandelion; there a sickly rose-bush reared its head, and bore a few sadly degenerate blossoms in the thick of a crop of hardy thistles. The very paths had disappeared; the miniature lake, with its fountain in the centre, where gold and silver fish had eagerly watched for the fragments scattered on the water for them by white jewelled fingers, was a stagnant slimy pool; and the shattered remains of a statue lying here and there, half hidden among the weeds, completed the picture of desolate decay.

Such was the state of young Wycherley's ancestral home on the occasion of this his first visit, not only to it, but to England. What his sentiments might be was apparent to the steward only by his gestures; for though he and his companion talked volubly, the

conversation was all in French. But those gestures were sufficiently indicative of reprobation and disgust to need no spoken comment. His friend appeared to be endeavouring to induce him to look more kindly on his position and prospects. At least, so the steward judged from his tone and manner, and from a question or two addressed in English to himself. But after listening for a while, the young man turned away with an impatient shrug of his shoulders, and walked towards the house, at the open door of which was already in waiting old Mrs. Fothergill, who took charge of the court, interpreting her duties within the mild limits of locking and barring the kitchen door at night, and unlocking and unbarring it in the morning.

It was a quaint, rambling, old house, when once you were inside, with a fine oak panelled hall, long straggling passages, and all sorts of odd-shaped rooms, which seemed to have been scattered about without a vestige of regular plan; large, commodious chambers appearing where you would have expected to find tiny closets, and small gloomy cells where you would have fancied you were certain to come upon the best rooms in the house. All the windows appeared to have been constructed after the same rule. Where unexpected couples or triplets of steps lurked perilously, semi-darkness reigned; where footing was smooth and secure, broad and lofty latticed windows admitted floods of light.

Two things alone were consistent throughout the whole house at that moment, a thick coating of dust on every spot where dust could rest, and the universal damp musty odour of a place long disused and never aired.

With many an execration the two young men stumbled up or down the steps which lurked in darkness; with many a shrug of much significance looked round dreary deserted rooms. At last, their inspection completed, they stood again in the hall, and there, after talking earnestly for some little time, Mr. Wycherley turned to the steward.

"My father always told me this was a dreary place; but such a gloomy old dungeon I had no expectation to find."

"It could soon be made to look very different, sir. You must remember it has been left untouched for some thirty years. Time was, I've heard the old folk about here say, when Wycherley Court was thought the prettiest place in the county."

"Yes, you are right," broke in the other young man, speaking with a strong foreign accent, "and you are quite wrong, my dear Wycherley. A few weeks could make this a charming chateau; quite delightful. Consider—"

"I will consider nothing," broke in the lord of the manor, "save how best to get rid of the mouldy old cavern."

"Oh well, then sell it!"

"No, no. I cannot sell it."

"Ah! Bah! Your entails!"

"No, it is not entailed. But my ancestors have lived here for many generations. I do not like the idea of losing it entirely."

"You might let it, sir," interposed the steward. "It's a place for which many would give you a good rent, and undertake as well to put it all in good order."

"Capital! An excellent suggestion! Arrange it

at once. I understand none of these things. Get me a good rent, and you shall have a handsome commission. Now, De Vernay, away! If I could resolve to sell the place, I would offer it for a cemetery. Failing that, we will offer it as a dwelling-place to some sombre Briton; and let us back at once to our bright, ever-smiling Paris!"

This was the brief scene transacted within the precincts of Wycherley Court, while Monksford hovered expectant on the outskirts, fondly hugging the delusive hope that Mr. Wycherley was occupied in making arrangements for the immediate complete renovation of the place, preparatory to coming to live there.

Most fortunate, at current estimate, among all the Monksford damsels, pretty Rose Playfair, the eldest daughter of Doctor Tatnell's successor, enjoying her afternoon stroll amidst the rural beauties of the High Street, in company with a brother, old enough for propriety, and young enough to be innocuous, reached the gateway just in time to pause and let the fly pass, within which she saw two forms bend suddenly forward, and four dark eyes fix glances of somewhat bold admiration on herself.

The girl's fair face flushed slightly, and her blue eyes fell with a half-triumphant, half-embarrassed expression. She knew that she was at that moment, or would be, did they know the circumstances, an object of envy to every girl in Monksford; but at the same time the glances which had proclaimed her triumph were a shade too expressive for her country town experiences.

"Mamma, do look at Rose Playfair!" exclaimed

Mr. Moss's eldest daughter, a damsel gifted with no perilous pre-eminence in beauty, who was eagerly watching the course of events from her mother's drawing-room window. "Just see how she's dressed out."

"Quite ridiculous, my dear, and she's growing really a bold-looking girl. I'm sure I hope poor Mrs. Playfair mayn't have trouble with her. But if she has, she'll have no one to thank but herself."

Miss Bradley had also been a witness to the terrible enormity of poor Rose Playfair having attracted a passing glance of admiration from two rather dissipated-looking young men, presumably deeply initiated in all the mysterious iniquities of Paris. And when, over the tea table, she retailed the news of the day for the benefit of the rector, she concluded with the remark that she was afraid Rose Playfair was growing up a sad flirt. She never lost an opportunity of depreciating her in his eyes. Not from any inherent malicious sentiment towards the girl herself, but simply as a prudent precautionary measure. Lionel Lawrence was a sober-going bachelor, of some five-and-thirty years of age, to whom Miss Bradley judged blooming girlhood to be dangerous; and if a dread of losing her home did unconsciously quicken her anxieties, she was really and truly solicitous for her cousin's welfare, and honestly convinced that it would be very disastrous to him should he be ensnared by Rose Playfair's pretty face.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREAT OCTAVIUS BULLER.

ESTIMATED at his own valuation, by far the most important person in Monksford, or for many a mile round, was Mr. Octavius Buller, architect and surveyor. Indeed, as it may safely be affirmed that Mr. Buller's estimate of himself was absolute, not relative, it is not too much to assert that he was, in his own eyes, a representative man to the whole universe. It had never occurred to him to measure himself against any other created being. The many sides, the varied aspects of life, which present strange complications, and grave and perplexing questions to preachers, moralists, and politicians, were to him but empty phrases—the self-invented problems of crack-brained enthusiasts. His religious, social, and political creed resolved itself in sublime simplicity into two great divisions. The first comprehending—if the term may be legitimately applied to a unit—Octavius Buller; the second, the whole remaining created universe, which was to him a mere remainder; only so much of it having, in his estimation

any just or sufficient cause for existence, as could be made use of to serve the interests or advance the projects of the first great division—Octavius Buller.

His professional designation, in his case, included a good deal. He was quite ready to undertake much which hardly fell within the legitimate province of either an architect or surveyor. There were title-deeds and securities locked up in the fireproof safe in his office, which could hardly have come there in exchange for plans or surveyor's work; and Mr. Moss, who hated him, even went so far as to remark, that wherever Buller got himself in, Dyson & Dyer, the principal upholsterers in the High Street, were sure of orders; and that it was easy enough to judge by their prices of the commissions they paid.

Mr. Buller's house was in the High Street, on the western side. It was quite new; he had, in fact, built it himself, and it was held to be the most pretentious, self-asserting, house in Monksford. Strangely does dead material receive and embody the characteristics of the intelligent artificer who moulds it. Self-assertion was the very essence of Mr. Buller's being; vaunting itself alike in speech, gesture, and gait. Like the curses of the dread anathema, it infused itself into every moment and action of his life. If Mr. Buller snored in his slumbers, that snore would unquestionably be self-asserting; certain it is that he could not remark, in his loud pompous tones, to a passing acquaintance, that it was a fine day, without the simple remark, seeming to assert Octavius Buller, much more loudly than it did any fact concerning the weather.

The house had a low window in front, so Mr. Buller's view of the High Street was more comprehensive than that of his less highly-favoured neighbours. From that window he watched the departure of the young lord of the manor on the day of his first visit to his domains, and from that window he continued to watch, whistling quietly to himself, long after the fly had disappeared. Mr. Buller had as keen a thirst for information as most of his neighbours, but underlain by more definite purpose than animated the majority of them. He had often had occasion to observe that, if you were only well informed of other people's affairs, you had frequent chances, otherwise wanting, of furthering your own interests. On the present occasion he had calculated probabilities, and calculated rightly.

After the lapse of a short time, he saw Mr. Wycherley's steward returning alone, on foot, from the direction of the railway station. Then, leaving his post of observation, he put on his hat and sallied forth from his house. When the steward came up, he was standing on the pavement, irreproachable in linen and unassailable in broad cloth, with feet far apart and toes well pointed outwards, lighting his cigar with the air of the typical man, in his person and actions at once the standard of excellence and type for all imitation.

"Ah! good afternoon, Haigg," he exclaimed; "going up to the Court, I suppose? I'm going to my office. I'll walk with you. Try one of these cigars; you'll find them excellent."

The steward accepted the cigar and companionship, not, perhaps, with quite so marked an air of

eager gratification as Mr. Buller might have deemed fitting had he been observant on such points, which, however, his complete envelopment in the mantle of his own exuberant self-satisfaction entirely prevented. They walked on together, Mr. Haigg, a tall, lithe, active man, with difficulty accommodating his long swinging stride to the majestic deportment of Mr. Buller, who, short and rather stout, never endangered his dignity by rapid motion, but walked slowly, with feet and legs at the same angle as when standing, ever too conscious of all demanded from him by his great importance to present to the world the spectacle of any such frivolous carelessness of gait and manner as might sit well enough upon the shoulders of less heavily-weighted humanity.

"So I hear you've had a visit from the new lord of the manor," he began.

"Yes; Mr. Wycherley has been here to-day."

"The first time you have seen him, I presume?"

"Yes; he has never been in England before."

"Does Mr. Wycherley speak of any intention to come and reside at the Court?"

"He mentioned no such intention," the steward coldly replied.

He knew full well that in the eyes of Mr. Octavius Buller he was a person of quite inferior position, and was equally aware that the honour of his companionship and cigar had not been offered without ulterior purposes, bearing on the great man's aims and objects; and if that present purpose was to pump information out of him respecting his employer's affairs, he was well determined it should prove an abortive one.

"That is unfortunate. I do assure you, my dear Haigg, this is a matter of importance. You know that I have some experience in such matters, and I can assure you non-resident landed proprietors are a mistake, both socially and politically. I do trust, as you have the opportunity, you will urge on Mr. Wycherly the importance of his residing on his own property."

"I imagine that Mr. Wycherly will probably settle his own affairs without any reference to myself," was the dry rejoinder.

"Of course you would not intrude, certainly not. I merely urge upon you a fitting use of any opportunity which may occur. I shall not hesitate to urge this view of the matter upon Mr. Wycherley myself, should I have the chance of doing so. To a gentleman who has been so entirely resident abroad, a knowledge of the views and feelings of, I might almost say, his fellow-townsmen, cannot fail to be valuable."

A man of less consequence than Octavius Buller, and therefore more at leisure to observe his fellow-creatures, might have detected a faint smile upon his hearer's face. Haigg had been listening not half-an-hour earlier to the parting injunctions of young Wycherley, to lose no time in securing the best tenant he could for Wycherley Court, on a long lease, and explanations that by the best tenant he meant the one who could be induced to give the highest rent, while undertaking to put the place in thorough order himself. Mr. Octavius Buller's chance of imparting to the lord of the manor his views on the subject of non-resident landlords, appeared therefore to

be a remote one. The steward's words were consequently somewhat ironical, when he replied,—

"Undoubtedly. I should strongly advise you to enlighten him whenever you have a chance. Good afternoon, I am going up to the Court."

"I wonder why that fellow is so anxious Mr. Wycherley should come to live here?" he mused, as he walked up the avenue. "Hopes he will get the work of doing up the place, I suppose," and then he smiled again at the thought of how soon those hopes would meet with a downfall; for only the fitting reticence of an honest man regarding his master's affairs had kept him silent on the subject of Mr. Wycherley's intentions, not any thought of concealment. Had not old Mrs. Fothergill been standing by when the young man had so emphatically expressed his ideas? Haigg would have staked a year's salary on the certainty that before it was dark all Monksford would know that Wycherley Court was to be let.

Yet he himself, for some two hours, held back the blessed waters of information from the thirsting soul of the eager town. At the very door of the court he stopped Mrs. Fothergill, bonneted and cloaked.

"Bless me, Mrs. Fothergill!" he said, with an assumption of grave surprise, "where are you going? I thought the rheumatics would hardly let you walk upstairs to open the windows on a fine day?"

"Well, to be sure, Mr. Haigg, who ever thought of seeing you back so soon? I've just found I'm clean run out of tea, so I must e'en make shift to hobble down into the town for some, though in truth, I be

terriable bad. The house be dreadful damp, Mr. Haigg ; I don't know who'll ever take it."

"You old humbug," he sharply replied, laying his hand on her shoulder, "you know there's not a vestige of damp in that house, just as well as I know that you've no mind to be turned out of comfortable quarters. Now mind, if I catch you spreading a report that the house is damp, out you go within twenty-four hours. If you behave properly, I'll help you to find some home when you have to go. Now you are warned, so look out. Come in and attend to some orders I have to give, and then, tea or no tea, you can go down into the town if you like, only remember."

Mrs. Fothergill did go down into the town after the steward left. She had not thought it necessary to inform him that between the time of Mr. Wycherley's departure and his own return she had received three invitations to tea and supper. And before he slept that night, Mr. Octavius Buller was quite aware that Mr. Wycherley had no intentions of taking up his abode in his ancestral home, and had reflected more over that fact than, in outward seeming, its importance to himself would warrant.

There were, however, more schemes floating about in the brain of Mr. Buller than were ever made known to his neighbours. His position had for him both a dark and a bright side. The latter aspect was that which it wore when he reflected upon what had hitherto been the one great object of his life, and calculated the amount of success with which his pursuit thereof had been attended. He had started in business with a determination to grow rich, and

to this object he had devoted all his energies so far. He had slaved at his business, he had grasped to the utmost, he had ground to the lowest; and, finally, turning a deaf ear to the voice of inclination, he had, just at the moment when a little capital was a matter of importance, married a pale, sandy-haired, inanimate little woman, with a small fortune. Things had gone well with him; the occasional checks his prospering fortunes had received had been but slight, and now he found himself in a well-assured position, and with worldly possessions increasing steadily and fairly rapidly.

But this very fact, by allowing him to relax in his all-absorbing devotion to the attainment of his object, left him time to reflect more frequently upon the darker side of the picture, and, in truth, darkened it still more. His social position dashed his cup of prosperity with a flavour of gall. That it was not one in his eyes worthy of him may well be divined; but more than that, it did not even reach the level on which, under more favourable circumstances, he might have been firmly planted. His father had been a lawyer, therefore a professional man pure and simple. Octavius Buller, though calling himself an architect, and therefore claiming the standing of a professional man, knew himself, and knew that all his fellow-townsmen knew, his avocations had fully more of the nature of a business than a profession. Many people in Monksford, who smarted under his air of universal patronage, adroitly spying the weak point in his harness, always spoke of him as "Buller, the house-agent." Mr. Moss never lost an opportunity of asserting

his full conviction that he was actually a partner in the firm of Dyson & Dyer.

These things had always chafed him. Now that with increased fortune he felt his social weight increasing, and his right to a recognition of that fact more indisputable, his thoughts began to turn more and more to the consideration of the best means to secure his rights, and hence the schemes which of late had wreathed themselves much round Wycherley Court. He was very sanguine. Could Octavius Buller, who had worked himself up to his present position from that of a penniless clerk in an auctioneer's office, fail in the further attainment of his aims in life? Such a possibility never crossed his thoughts, but he hardly balanced chances correctly. Any man of very average ability, whose moral characteristics will let him toil, screw, grasp, and grind unremittingly, can grow rich; but to attain for himself a higher social standing in the eyes of the world, is a task to be accomplished by a very different method of procedure. A man may grow rich though every human being who crosses his path should hate him; but social success involves the suffrages of his fellow-men. And the man who is deeply penetrated with a consciousness of his own super-eminent merit is dangerously weighted in the race for that prize. He is apt to be too unobservant, and too prone to obtrude chafing and fretting angles for irritated or bored humanity to damage itself against in the daily jostle of life.

CHAPTER III.

THE TOLLMACHES.

FOR many weeks after that visit of Mr. Wycherley to Wycherley Court, life in Monksford was at fever heat. Now it was some foreign nobleman, some relative of Mr. Wycherley's French mother, who had taken the place, because good hunting was to be had in the neighbourhood. Then it was a wealthy London stockbroker, able to spend at least a hundred and fifty thousand a-year, and with a large family of sons and daughters, all grown up. He gave way to a spendthrift Irish baronet, who was, in his turn, dispossessed by an evangelical peer addicted to preaching, and very successful in converting young women. For a while it was absolutely certain that the member for the county had bought the place as a wedding present for his daughter; and then it became equally indisputable that Mr. Huddlestone intended moving himself to Wycherley Court, and leaving The Hall to his son, who was going to marry Rose Playfair, to the great disgust of his father. The social thermometer rose and fell

with each fly that drove through the old gateway, and returned again without any apparent results; for, strange to say, every individual in the town, how positive soever he might be that the rumour which he for the moment believed was absolute and indisputable truth, was none the less eager to gain possession of any other theories which might be afloat. Mrs. Jones was deluged with creature comforts to an extent which almost indemnified her for the frequency with which she was called upon to open the gate; and Mrs. Fothergill led a life of roaring dissipation.

Visitors were many; aspirants for the honour of undertaking the renovation of Wycherley Court few. Most of those who came were speedily scared at the sight of the dilapidated condition of the whole place, and Mr. Wycherley's chances of securing a good, or indeed any, tenant seemed small. Mrs. Fothergill's spirits began to rise, and Monksford to show symptoms of apathetic indifference, resulting from the exhaustion consequent on a long continued strain.

In the matter of the letting of Wycherley Court, however, the good people of Monksford were doomed to a fate not uncommon to those who spend much time in seeking for information on subjects not immediately concerning themselves. For all they watched, listened, waited, and eagerly grasped at every fragment of rumour or conjecture, the future occupant of Wycherley Court came and went unobserved, though his visit was shrouded in no studied veil of mystery, had made his offer, and was the accepted tenant of the place, before

a suspicion of his existence had dawned upon the town.

The two people in the neighbourhood who most persistently turned a deaf ear to all gossip were, Mr. Huddlestone at The Hall, and Mr. Lawrence at the rectory. The latter, it is true, was doomed to hear a good deal nightly retailed for his benefit by Miss Bradley, but it was heard with the outward ear alone. If any of it did succeed in effecting an entrance into his preoccupied mind, he forgot it again in ten minutes. Mr. Huddlestone, lacking the possession of any domestic purveyor of local news, rarely heard any at all. Naturally, therefore, these two men were the first to become acquainted with what was really truth, and to know that Mr. Wycherley's tenant was Mr. Tollmache, a widower with one daughter. Mr. Huddlestone heard it from a friend in London; the rector from Mr. Haigg, who was not quite so reticent with him as with Mr. Buller.

Mr. Tollmache was a younger son of good old family, but a younger son to whose share had fallen a larger portion of this world's goods than is in general reserved for his class—the consequence of his mother having been a considerable heiress. He manifested all the characteristics which might naturally be expected from a man of ordinary type so circumstanced. The possession of an ample fortune, united to the comparative insignificance of a younger son, had removed from him all necessity to exert himself in any way; and he had no strongly developed tendencies towards either good or evil, so he had expanded into as nearly a pure negative as is

possible for any human being to be. He did most things a little, and nothing very much. He hunted a little, shot a little; occasionally, under pressure, took a mild part in election, or other local business; and was an invaluable chairman where one was required, of distinguished appearance and courteous manner, who could at the same time be relied on not to interfere energetically with any business in hand.

Mr. Tollmache had married young, and had lost his wife some few years afterwards. He had been an excellent husband, up to a certain point; nevertheless his young wife, a girl possessed of strong deep feelings, and ardent temperament, had soon grown into a quiet, rather sad-looking woman, with wistful, troubled eyes; lavishing an amount of passionate devotion on her child which was highly praiseworthy in the eyes of mothers of the stereotyped order of excellence, but otherwise somewhat sadly suggestive.

Kate Tollmache led a strange sort of life after her mother's death. Her father could hardly be said to have opinions on the subject of education. Very rarely did anything in his mind shape itself into a form so positive and clearly defined as an opinion. He had notions, vague impressions, that education was something necessary for people who had to get their own living, without exactly going out as servants, but, beyond a few accomplishments, quite beside the mark in the case of a well-born heiress. He engaged a governess for his little girl, because it was necessary she should have some one to look after her, but he never troubled himself as to the

manner in which that governess discharged her functions.

The one chosen was a harmless nonentity, but at anyrate she was not an obstructive; and, in the case of Kate Tollmache, that was all that was necessary. The girl was allowed to grow up, instead of being trained up; and not being sedulously taught, she very soon took to learning. She could certainly not have passed a competitive examination in any one thing, but she possessed a great deal of general knowledge, and considerable aptitude for applying it. She was fond of reading, had acquired a habit of thinking about what she read, and had quite sufficient power of reasoning and reflecting to have been rather a terror to a vast number of highly trained instructors of youth.

Thoroughly honest and truthful, possessed of strongly marked individuality, and fearlessly independent, it needed no prophetic gift to fortell that, sooner or later, Kate Tollmache would come into collision with society — with what form soever of that strange, artificial creation she might be brought into contact. Such headstrong travellers along the road of this our mortal life will never quietly pursue level beaten tracks, along which mediocrity plods demurely, but will be for ever breaking through the boundaries, to indulge in unauthorised private explorations, reaping, oftimes, rich rewards, at the cost of downfalls and disasters. Then mediocrity, far beyond whose ken lie the rewards, points exultingly to the bruises and scars, and hugs the consciousness of its own superior wisdom with prodigious self-satisfaction.

When Kate Tollmache had reached the age of twenty-seven, she had grown tired of the wandering life she had led for years, and persuaded her father, who rather appreciated the advantage of having her to make up his mind for him, to take a place in the country, and settle there. She it was who brought him to look at Wycherley Court, and she who induced him to think it would be rather pleasant to settle amidst such utter ruin, and recreate according to their own taste and fancy.

Thus it came about that Wycherley Court found a tenant, and that a new and wide field for research, conjecture, and assertion was thrown open to the highly appreciative nature of Monksford.

There was quite a stir and excitement in the town when the rumour began to circulate that the Court was actually let; for though many elderly people could remember the house a cheerful inhabited country seat, it had been empty and deserted long enough to make the change seem something new to everyone. Besides, there were vague reports, and contradictory stories, delightfully stimulative to curiosity, so there was much anxious questioning. Only no one thought of asking either the rector or Mr. Huddlestone about it, because they never did know anything that was going on. At least, they never talked about things—quite sufficient proof to Monksford that they knew nothing.

Mr. Moss was the fortunate man for whom one of the endless complications of social life first secured most definite intelligence. A sorting clerk in the post-office owed him a bill, which it was not convenient to pay, and it is not too much to assert that

that standing debt was worth double its amount to Mr. Moss. He received instant notice of all postal changes, and a great deal of other less strictly official and exceedingly interesting information. Now it was at once imparted to him that Mr. Haigg had been seen to post a letter, which this clerk himself took from the box, and which bore the address of "The Honourable Horace Tollmache," and that one had also arrived addressed to Mr. Haigg, with the signature of "H. Tollmache" in the corner.

Forth on the instant sped Mr. Moss, leaving, for once, all the important commercial transactions of the firm to attend to themselves. Business was business—but at that moment a glorious opportunity opened before him of inflicting severe mortification on an enemy. It was just the hour when Mr. Buller would probably be proceeding majestically along the High Street towards his office; and Mr. Moss knew he would be terribly annoyed at not being first in the field with the information. He met him as he expected, but he was too eager to be cautious, so Mr. Buller caught him out.

"Have you heard the news, Buller?" he asked, they treated one another as cordially in public as they hated one another in private.

"What news, my dear fellow? I'm always hearing news—and Gad! the greater part is a pack of lies!"

"About who's taken Wycherley Court?"

"Lord, my dear Moss! that's no news to me. Why I had a letter from the fellow three days since. What on earth's this his name is? Confound it! how I do forget names. I've got the letter though

in one of my pockets now, I believe. No, by Jove! I haven't! Hang it! I hope I've not lost it, for I've never had time to answer it; and I forget even what he wanted to know. What on earth is it? I'll tell you directly. Lord, my dear fellow! if I'd known you cared I'd have told you three days since who it was. Hang it—what the devil is the name?"

"I don't want to be told," Mr. Moss protested. "I know already, it's Tollmache!"

"Tollmache; yes, that's the name!"

"The Honourable Horace Tollmache," suggested Mr. Moss.

"Yes, of course. Capital tenant for the place. He wrote from a hotel in London, I think. By Jove! I hope I'll find that letter at the office! I'm in a precious scrape if I can't."

"Mr. Haigg will be able to give you the address."

"Yes, my good fellow, but he won't be able to tell me what was in the letter. Good-bye, I can't waste any more time; desperately busy just now. I'll keep you up to the news, as you're interested in the matter."

Mr. Buller resumed his dignified progress along the High Street, leaving his mortified antagonist muttering to himself—"Conceited ass!" but little dreaming that he had himself enabled his adversary to inform everyone he met, with an air of condescending superiority, that the new tenant of Wycherley Court was the Honourable Horace Tollmache.

Doctor Playfair carried home the news from his afternoon round of visits. He had seen Mrs. Tatnell;

she had met Mr. Haigg that very day, and wormed out of him the fact that Mr. Tollmache was a widower, with one daughter.

Pretty, silly little Rose Playfair went and wandered somewhat dejectedly about the garden after tea. Her foolish brains had been busy constructing airy castles since the day of Mr. Wycherley's visit to the court. What handsome men he and his companion were! and how evident had been their admiration. She was sure her ear had caught the words "jolie," "charmante." How different was their appearance from that of her local admirers! so beautifully dressed, so noble looking! It was a fact that young Mr. Huddlestone had shown some symptoms of attraction, and Rose's heart had beat fast at the thought. But now, by contrast, he seemed a very commonplace young man. It was quite true he was very clever, and bore a high character, both for good sense and moral worth; but how tame and common he seemed contrasted with Mr. Wycherley!

Rose had grown very sage, and had reflected upon the folly of making a hasty choice, and had resolved, that although she knew her mother was very anxious she should encourage George Huddlestone, she would not be in a hurry, but would wait until she was quite certain before she made up her mind.

And now Wycherley Court was let, and the tenant was a middle-aged widower, with a grown-up daughter. Poor Rose's airy castles all came tumbling down, and she began to think that after all perhaps she had better make up her mind to encourage George Huddlestone. He would have

plenty of money. The Hall was a very nice place; and if he was rather stout, a little clumsy in figure, and a trifle careless about his dress—well—she supposed when people were married they didn't care so much about such things; and he was so kind, she had no doubt he would make a very good husband.

By the time the moon arose, and Mrs. Playfair was calling anxiously from the drawing-room window to Rose to come in, for the dew was falling heavily, the portionless little damsel had almost reasoned herself into the conviction that she had better be content to accept a wealthy, kind, high-principled, and universally respected man as a husband, notwithstanding the melancholy certainty that in outward appearance he did not contrast favourably with the brilliant Frenchmen; but her mood that night was one of pensive resignation. She sighed heavily as she was brushing out her beautiful fair hair, and told her sixteen-year-old sister to enjoy herself while she could, for she would find ere long that life was not all sunshine, and that its first brightness was soon clouded over, the expression of which sentiments caused Alice to look up at her with awe and respect, as possessing deep knowledge of life, and evidently weighed down by some heavy and mysterious sorrow.

George Huddlestone's decided preference for Rose Playfair had been a subject of much and anxious discussion at The Hall, especially in that border-land which separates the blaze of brilliantly lighted drawing-rooms from the gloom of midnight darkness, where bedroom candles reign in bed or dressing-

rooms, over the performance of many mysterious and complicated rites and ceremonies. Mr. and Mrs. Huddlestone were hardly one upon the subject.

"I don't like it," Mrs. Huddlestone said, when one night the matter was under discussion. "I've nothing to say against the girl. She's pretty and amiable, but she's an empty-headed little thing, or I'm much mistaken; and I'm sure, with his fortune, George might do much better."

"Don't say that, my dear. Remember how much ridicule my poor father brought upon himself by trying to appear something more than he was. I wouldn't like to see George marry for anything but love; and, thank Heaven, I say, he can afford to think of nothing else. I don't suppose the girl will have a sixpence, but if George loves her, she sha'n't be one atom the worse off for that. Let them please themselves."

"But she's silly."

"I think she is; but if George fancies her that can't be helped. It wouldn't mend matters if he married some one who would please us, and then didn't care for her. You may depend, a man who marries a woman without loving her, ties a clog round his own neck which'll make it hard for him to keep his head above water in the struggle of life. A man who hasn't a home, and his heart there, always seems to me like one who has to try and swim with his feet tied."

"Well," sighed the disappointed mother, "I cannot but think George is throwing himself away; and I'm sure I shall tell him so some day."

Mr. Huddlestone did not immediately reply. He

came forward from his dressing-room to where his wife was standing before her toilet table, and putting one arm round her shoulders took her hand in his, and gently kissed it, then said, in a voice that trembled slightly,—

"Don't do that, Margaret. Some thirty years since my mother said that very thing to me; and every year of my life that has passed since I have felt more and more strongly how false the assertion was. But I wouldn't have George feel towards his mother as I felt towards mine at that moment, for the whole of my fortune."

"O James!" It was all Mrs. Huddlestone said, but the words came with a quick sob. And then there was a little love scene, very romantic and becoming, had they been a newly married bride and bridegroom, but very ridiculous, of course, in the case of a husband and wife of thirty years' standing, and both on the wrong side of fifty. But let those speak who can speak from experience, and say whether, when pure affection has kept the heart fresh and young through thirty years of married life, the love which brightens those hours when the shadows are begining to lengthen, and the travel-worn feet to tread the downward path, has not a worth and power far beyond the most fervent glow of impetuous youth?

Mrs. Huddlestone was quite as firmly convinced as before that Rose Playfair was silly, and not worthy of such a prize as her peerless George; but the knowledge that she had been herself held unworthy of her James would have sealed her lips, if nothing else had done it; so she greeted the girl with kindly

cordiality whenever they met, and only sighed a little, and wished in secret her son had turned his thoughts in some other direction.

Then in a very short time it came to pass that the long closed gates of Wycherley Court were daily thrown open in the early morning, and allowed to stand unclosed until night. Tribes of workmen of all descriptions passed in and out, and heavily laden vans and carts came and went. A portly housekeeper arrived, and ousted the irate Mrs. Fothergill, to her great indignation and the sympathising concern of all Monksford, which saw its richest mine of information thus suddenly worked out. Mrs. Fothergill retired to an almshouse and grumbled unheeded, invitations to tea and supper having totally failed her.

Soon after the housekeeper came an important-looking head coachman. He did not remain, only came and went from time to time, superintending various alterations and renovations in the stable department. Mrs. Bell was grave and silent, and carried on her internal arrangements with dignified reserve, so that all which the town could learn, by an occasional trespass into the park, was that the windows were being cleaned, and blinds and curtains renewed all through the house. Even this meagre source of information was shortly cut off by Mr. Haigg's stopping up the illegal bye-path, and putting up a notice to trespassers. Mr. Cox, the coachman, was not personally more communicative; but his work was more external, and its nature necessitated the employment of workmen in the neighbourhood, so it soon became known that Mr. Toll-

mache had an excellent stud, that Miss Tollmache was a great rider, and that she had a favourite bay mare, about which she was very particular, and for which a most carefully fitted up loose-box was being prepared.

Monksford had never known such an exciting time since it had become a place of importance, and the moral temperature rose to fever heat when servants and baggage began to appear. Quite an eager throng collected in the High Street the day the horses arrived, and much speculation was hazarded as to which was Miss Tollmache's favourite bay mare. One lady's saddle was on a powerful black hack, a grey pony carried another, so they conveyed no guiding hint. Mrs. Tatnell inclined towards a boney roan carriage horse, and Miss Witham, of Holt Cottage, who professed to have been a great rider herself, and to be still a good judge of a horse, resolutely decided in favour of a rather reedy chestnut, because, as she expressed it, "He had such beautiful thin legs, he must be a lady's horse!"

In the course of another week Mr. and Miss Tollmache came. It was raining hard and blowing heavily, so all that Monksford could do was to watch with hungry eyes a close carriage, with shut windows, blurred and dashed with trickling rain drops, drive through the High Street and up the long elm avenue, and then retire to rest, eagerly expectant and hoping for finer weather.

CHAPTER IV.

MUNICIPAL ENTANGLEMENTS.

NO one in Monksford or the neighbourhood was a more frequent visitor at The Hall than Lionel Lawrence, the rector. There were very few unoccupied evenings that he did not spend there. The rectory was his house, but it could hardly lay claim to the blessed name of home, for the companionship of Miss Bradley was the only phantom it afforded of domestic life; and that was rather an unprepossessing phantom. She was very useful to him, and he knew it and was grateful, always treating her with the utmost kindness and consideration. Her presence in his house was an impregnable fortification, sheltering him securely from all those assaults which are the terror of the unprotected male, and which are wont to be directed with special ferocity against undefended clergymen. Lionel Lawrence in his younger days had been the curate of a bachelor rector, and his own experience and observation had taught him fully to appreciate the value of his energetic, if not too congenial, protector. Holt

Cottage was less than a quarter of a mile from the rectory, and there dwelt the three Misses Witham, ranging in age from eight-and-thirty to four and-forty, and all three indefatigable district visitors and school teachers. The bachelor rector who would have dared, under these circumstances, to inhabit the rectory undefended would have been a bold man.

It was no pathetic romance, no tale of blighted love, which had kept Lionel Lawrence a lonely man until middle age was creeping near, rather one of those discrepancies between nature and circumstances which the tyrannical edicts of social slavery bind as a heavy burden and lay remorselessly on men's shoulders. He was the son of a respectable tradesman in a northern country town, and, according to conventional rules, ought himself to have been measuring yards of tape and calico behind a counter, or, at best, occupying daily a high stool in a bank or office. That he was not in that suitable position he owed to the doting affection and frugal industrious habits of his father and mother, simple, but kindly honest folk, who, having but the one son, straightway resolved to save money enough to give him a good education, and, as they put it, "make a gentleman of him." The former purpose they had satisfactorily carried out, the latter had been entirely beyond their capabilities, nature having settled that point at their son's birth, without any reference to their wishes. Manly straightforward simplicity of character, sterling honesty of disposition, and much natural refinement of feeling, had been born with the child, coupled with that quick observation and

kindness of heart, which go a long way towards the composition of, if indeed they do not wholly constitute, the inestimable gift of tact. Under these circumstances, all that education could do was to provide a little surface polish, which would hardly have been missed had it been absent. Thus nature and his parents had leagued together to set social laws at defiance. The former had endowed the tradesman's son with a disposition which would have done honour to the highest rank; the latter had aided and abetted the indiscretion by lifting that son as near the level he was fitted to occupy as was in their power. But now society was down upon the infringement of prerogative, and revenged itself, not on the sinners, but on the victim; ruling that the woman who by birth and education would be a fitting partner for his achieved position must inevitably lose caste by marrying a man whose relations were small tradesmen, some even domestic servants. That any woman born in the same rank as himself should, even if naturally gifted, be thus uplifted by education to a higher social sphere, was a very improbable occurrence, and Lionel Lawrence would never have brooked a wife who could feel she had condescended in accepting all the boundless love and chivalrous tenderness which he would have lavished on the woman whom he wedded, or the companionship of one on whom that love and tenderness could not have been outpoured in passionate devotion. Therefore he had remained a lonely man, and little thought of marriage ever crossed his mind.

He was not one of those men of brilliant enterprise and restless activity whom all the world feels and

sees to be constantly doing a great deal; rather one of those quiet, unobtrusive workers, the value of whom is often overlooked until it is felt by being missed. If a heavy stress of work came upon him, he quietly curtailed his hours of rest, and said nothing about it; and if Miss Witham tenderly reproached him for looking fagged and overdone, he would reply, rather shortly, it must be admitted, that he liked work, it agreed with him much better than idleness. The groundwork of all his teaching, whether in word, deed, or life, was, "Be true—true in speech, action, and purpose. If you are bad, be honestly bad, and there is a hope for you that you may learn to be honestly good; but shun, as you would shun a corroding poison, the outward seeming of being what you are not."

That such a man was not universally popular need hardly be stated, but he was always a most welcome guest at The Hall, where nothing was hollow or false, and the atmosphere of which was therefore especially grateful to him. Thither he went one evening, after a hard day's work, looking pale and tired enough to have deprived Miss Witham of a whole night's sleep, had she seen him.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Huddlestone asked, as they shook hands.

"I've had a hard grind in the worst part of the parish, that's all. But it isn't you personally I want to-night; it's the mayor. Isn't Playfair here?" he added, glancing round. "I asked him to meet me."

"I daresay he'll come soon then. Sit down, mean-

time, and have a glass of wine, and let me know what you want from the mayor."

"A little official activity," he replied, a shade sharply. His acquaintance with corporate bodies was not very extensive, and he was occasionally somewhat disposed to blame his friend for a want of energy in his use of the powers conferred upon him by his official position.

"In what direction?" asked the mayor.

"In the direction of sanitary reform."

"Ah! You are thinking of that old drainage question?"

"Yes. Huddlestone, I tell you the state of that part of the town lying close along the river is a scandal and disgrace to us. There are fresh cases of typhoid fever in River Row this week. I met Playfair there this afternoon, and afterwards we went and looked over his book. I asked him to come and show it to you this evening. It is frightful to look at the statistics. Fevers of one sort or another are almost perpetual in the low parts of the town, and Playfair says that in surgical cases, erysipelas is nearly inevitable. Here he comes. He can tell you himself."

Doctor Playfair's note-book fully bore out the rector's assertions.

"I was talking to Porter the other day about it," he added. "He says there is no question that the drainage system of the town is not only radically defective in principle, but also quite insufficient to meet the increase in size of the town within the last fifty years. Of course, it is the low-lying parts which suffer most. Standing on such a steady

slope, the better-class houses do not feel the ill effects, as yet at least. Were the case different we should soon hear something about it. But the people clustered about the river are too ignorant fully to understand the matter, and too poor to fight the point for themselves if they did."

"You are quite right," Mr. Huddlestone said. "That is exactly the state of the case."

"And yet you, Huddlestone, the mayor, sit quiet, while you admit the existence of such a scandal!" exclaimed the rector, with some vehemence.

Mr. Huddlestone smiled. "I have not sat very quiet, Lawrence; but, unfortunately, abortive efforts leave no trace. I am mayor, as you say; unfortunately that is all. I am not mayor and town council to boot. Your acquaintance, my good friend, with corporate bodies is limited, and, so far as it goes, merely general. You have no knowledge of local entanglements. This drainage question has been brought before the town council from time to time during many years past, without any practical result, and without, as far as I can see, any chance of any such result in future. At least until some great catastrophe brings the strong engine of public opinion into action."

"Daniels said something of the same kind to me a little while since," Mr. Lawrence replied. "I confess I don't understand the case."

"Listen, then, and I will try to enlighten you. You know who the councilmen are. Well, for all the use they are, save two, they might as well be so many mummies."

"And those two exceptions?"

"Are Moss and Buller. Those two men are virtually the corporation, for such a large majority of the rest are, from one cause or another, under the power of one or both of them, that they have everything their own way. Roberts is heavily in Moss's debt, and can't pay. Harrison owes Buller a lot of money. Dyson's largest warehouses are rented from Moss, but Buller plays into their hands in business matters; and so it goes on through nearly the whole lot. If Buller and Moss agreed, they could carry almost any measure they choose; but they hate one another right heartily; therefore, as a general rule, what one supports the other opposes, and the result is universal paralysis. About the only point upon which they do ever agree is respecting any measure which touches municipal expenditure. Now, as this drainage question involves that of a heavy outlay on the part of the corporation, both are dead against it, and will remain so as long as their own personal safety is not endangered. You can judge for yourselves, therefore, what chance there is of getting any efficient steps taken in the matter."

"But here are the facts. Fever is never long absent from those parts of the town. They can hardly resist such evidence, surely, if distinctly laid before them?"

"They will readily admit the facts, and flatly deny your conclusions; affirming the cause of the evil to be the dirty habits of a low-class population."

"Then what on earth can be done?"

"My good friend, that is a question I have de-

bated with myself fifty times; but I have never been able to find a satisfactory answer."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Dr. Playfair, "this is monstrous! The very safety of the town to be thus sacrificed, and the proper action of the authorities crippled by the private spite or parsimony of two members of the town council."

He spoke with considerable excitement. It was the first time the exact state of the case had been made clear to him. Hitherto he had attributed the inaction of the town council, in a matter the importance of which he had more than once urged upon their consideration, merely to the proverbial dilatoriness of corporate bodies.

The rector was silent. To him also the mayor's explanations were to some extent a revelation; but he was more accustomed to study phases of moral obliquity than Doctor Playfair was, and he was less surprised.

Mr. Huddlestone gave his shoulders a slight shrug.

"It is only one form of the social bondage under which, in one way or another, we all groan. In the shape of vested interests, rampant morality, conventional laws, time-honoured abuses, private ends, social tyranny binds us all in chains. The only difference is, that some hug their chains, and some struggle fiercely against them. And the former are best off as far as comfort goes. The latter have a rough time of it. Am I not about right, Lawrence?"

"It looks like it. In this case it seems to be the inherent selfishness of human nature which stands in our way. Just what any one would expect who knows the two men in question."

"Well, but," interposed Dr. Playfair, a little impatiently, not caring much for analysis of motives, the value of which as a starting point for action he did not perceive, "that's all very well. But the question is, what is to be done?"

"Find some lever which shall move the private interests of these men," replied the rector.

"By Jove! that'll be found one day or other," replied Doctor Playfair. "Some accidental circumstance will be certain, sooner or later, to carry fever into the upper parts of the town. Then they'll find out what they have done in keeping up a regular breeding ground for it close by."

"Ah, when that comes to pass," said Mr. Huddlestone, "I will answer for it energetic steps will be taken at once. There are others beside Moss and Buller who would then be roused into vigorous action. Failing such an appeal, there is, as far as I can see, only one chance. At least, it is true, is it not, Lawrence, that Daniels retires next Easter?"

"Yes; he has quite made up his mind."

"Then both Buller and Moss will stand for the parish churchwardenship. Should Buller be the successful candidate, and I think his chances are best, Moss's spite might accomplish this great end. If the corporation resolve to put the public drains into a thoroughly efficient condition, they will, of course, require ground landlords to look well into the state of their houses. Buller owns a good many houses in just the worst part of the town. He would be put to heavy expense in such a case. Moss will be quick enough to see that. Let Buller only worst him in the contest, and, if I know the man, he

will vote for efficient sanitary measures to spite Buller."

Doctor Playfair burst into a loud laugh. "Well done, Machiavelli," he exclaimed. "I say, rector, what do you say to such scheming?"

"It is only a calculation of probabilities," Mr. Lawrence replied. "No question of any endeavour to produce them. I believe Huddlestone is quite right."

"Talking of that election," continued Doctor Playfair a little anxiously, "Lawrence, of course, holds aloof altogether. But what shall you do, Huddlestone? Which shall you vote for?"

"For neither, certainly. I shall tell them both plainly, I consider neither fit for the post, and withhold my vote, unless some other more suitable candidate should come forward before Easter."

"Ah! that is all very well for you who are independent; but I can tell you these cases are very trying ones for a professional man. Of course, I never vote, but it's only choosing the lesser evil. One is sure to get into bad books with some one, either way. It's very anxious work; but in this case I must say I think you are making a mistake. If I were as independent as you are, Huddlestone, I'd back Buller up through thick and thin. He won't do any harm as churchwarden. He'll only strut a little more, the pompous ass! and if, by getting him elected, you should succeed in carrying the drainage question, you'd confer a benefit upon the town far more than sufficient to repay you for any annoyance your dislike to this course of action might inflict upon you."

"Well then, Playfair, I can only say I wish you were independent, and mayor of Monksford. I shall not fail to keep this matter before the council. Should Buller carry his election, and Moss, out of spite, urge on the measure, and gain the vote of the corporation, I can only say I shall be unfeignedly glad."

"Why, failing the corporation, should not the thing be done by public subscription?" Doctor Playfair asked.

He was a kind-hearted man, honestly anxious for the welfare of his poorer neighbours; and if his anxiety was stimulated by a desire to be rid of a sort of practice which was more irksome and taxing than remunerative, who shall venture to cast a stone at him? or even to say that he merited to have one cast at him? Does any precept, either sacred or merely moral, require that a man, with a family dependent upon him, should be in such a case entirely oblivious of his own interests?

Mr. Huddlestone shook his head. "I could not, as mayor, give my adhesion to any scheme calculated to throw upon private generosity a burden which the corporation ought to bear; and as a private individual, I should equally resist any such exaction. We have a great deal too much of that sort of thing among us already. It is most unfair that the liberality of the generous few, always heavily taxed, should be appealed to, to save the pockets of the careless or avaricious many."

"Well, I'd willingly give five pounds to any subscription for that purpose," Dr. Playfair said.

"I don't doubt you would, and my good friend

the rector here would give as much, and collect twenty times as much more; and such fellows as Buller, Moss, and the like would get off without giving a farthing. Even if, for very shame's sake, they did contribute, a sovereign would be the outside. Now, if this improvement is undertaken by the corporation, the expense would of course fall on the whole of the ratepayers, and with what result? I daresay your rates, Playfair, might be raised for the year to the extent of perhaps fifteen shillings or a sovereign, while men like Buller and Moss, holding a good deal of property in the town, would inevitably have to find many pounds. Do you think they do not calculate on that? No, no. The exertions of private generosity are more counted upon by public bodies than you suspect; and as long as I am mayor of Monksford I will steadily resist every attempt to throw upon it burdens which the whole community ought to bear."

"And in the meanwhile, the poor wretches down in those districts are to perish uncared for?"

"No, Playfair," interposed the rector decisively. "It is your place and mine to see that the utmost that private liberality can do for individual cases is done. Huddlestone's duties are equally clear. His official position as mayor binds him to watch over the interests of the whole community, and see that no injustice is done to one class in order to aid another."

Doctor Playfair succumbed. He was a good, common-place sort of man, and thought the rector and the mayor were a little strait-laced, and rather disposed to take a stilted view of the case. Official

rectitude was all very well, and Monksford was, of course, very fortunate in having such a high-principled, honourable man at the head of the corporation; but it would surely be better to relax just a little, when a great good was to be secured by what was after all a very small evil.

He was not inclined, however, to oppose the mayor, especially at that moment, when George Huddlestone's attention to Rose were certainly becoming marked, so he went home and talked the matter over with Mrs. Playfair, who felt very strongly about the amount of wholly unremunerative work and anxiety which those low districts entailed upon her husband, and about the expenditure for wine and beef-tea which the kind-hearted doctor would insist on often sending thither. She was disposed to condemn, more emphatically, both the rector and the mayor.

"Well, I do think it's a very silly way to look at it. I call it downright squeamishness. If Mr. Huddlestone can't get the thing done by the corporation, he oughtn't to oppose it being done any other way. He's a kind-hearted, liberal man, I know; but its always the way. People never do see a thing that doesn't touch themselves in the same light. They would if it did. If Mr. Huddlestone got rung up on cold nights, after a hard day's work, as often as you do, I suspect he wouldn't be quite so squeamish. I do think there's a little bit of selfish laziness in it," she added, fanning up the spark of her indignation with a vivid mental sketch of her husband's sufferings on account of this matter. "But never mind," she concluded, with a smile, as more hopeful subjects of reflection dashed across her thoughts.

"May be, ere long, we'll be able to bring a stronger influence than yours to bear upon the mayor."

But at three o'clock the following morning, Doctor Playfair was called up to go instantly to a house in River Row, and it was five o'clock before he got back. Then, at seven o'clock, he was obliged to turn out again, and snatch a hasty breakfast while he dressed for a long drive into the country, from whence he had not returned at three o'clock in the afternoon. About that time Miss Witham, who was a dear friend of Mrs. Playfair's, came to call; and poor Mrs. Playfair had worried herself into such a state of restless fidget, that she could not help detailing her grievances to her sympathising friend.

"He just got no rest at all. He was quite tired when he set out this morning, and I daresay he won't have a bit of food; and he says he must go back to River Row this evening. I'm sure he isn't safe himself, going to those places when he's tired out, and had no regular meals. I'm sure what with wear and tear, and the time he loses, and the wine and beef-tea he's always sending to those people, we're pounds and pounds out of pocket by that district; and I do think it's a shame Mr. Huddlestone should oppose the thing being done by subscription, if the corporation won't do it. And I do believe as mayor he might get it done, but for a little—" she paused; she was on the point of saying "selfish indolence," but recollected in time that the mayor was George Huddlestone's father; so she substituted "want of activity, and public spirit."

Miss Witham sympathised much with her friend's anxieties; enlarged a little on the terrible risk of infection run by district visitors, and others of a like self-devoted class, and on her own undeviating confidence in an overruling Providence; but avoided expressing any disapprobation of the mayor's opposition to the public subscription scheme. Then she went her way to visit another dear friend, Mrs. Buller, whom she liked, because she could patronise the meek, spiritless little woman, who unresistingly accepted it as her lot in life to attend to her household, and be ordered about by her husband, without her personal feelings or wishes ever being consulted about anything.

To her Miss Witham retailed the sorrows of Mrs. Playfair, and her dissatisfaction with the mayor. "I should have thought, seeing how hard they are trying to catch George Huddlestone for that flirt of a daughter of theirs, she'd hardly have talked against Mr. Huddlestone in that way, shouldn't you?"

"Yes, indeed," assented submissive little Mrs. Buller, who had been busy all the time over a refractory piece of knitting, and had only taken in fragmentary snatches of her friend's discourse, which, however, she handed on, pierced together in a highly effective manner, to her husband, when he came home, explaining how Mrs. Playfair had declared the draining would have been done long since by public subscription if the mayor hadn't interfered, and had expressed her opinion that he was very selfish and indifferent to the public welfare; and how Miss Witham believed the Playfairs were so

annoyed they meant to throw George Huddlestone over entirely.

Mr. Buller was not prone to accept unhesitatingly all he heard from his wife, but he made a mental note of the useful information he had received. The drainage question was on the cards, and there was some suggestion of it being carried out by public subscription, if the corporation proved immoveable. He made a hasty calculation regarding rates, from the vantage ground of a more accurate knowledge of the probable cost of the undertaking than the mayor could possibly possess, and resolved to be doubly firm in his resistance to any proposal that the corporation should move in the matter.

Mr. Lawrence did not enlighten Miss Bradley, on his return home, respecting the discussion which had taken place at the mayor's house; but though he might, by such judicious silence, save his conscience from pangs of self-reproach on the score of mischief-making, he by no means deprived her of the information he withheld. Mrs. Dyson, as became her, considering the relations between Mr. Buller and the firm, cultivated intimacy with Mrs. Buller, whom fifteen years of subjection to the matrimonial sway of Octavius Buller had subdued into far too all-pervading a sense of her own utter insignificance to allow to attempt cultivating anyone. Mrs. Dyson heard an amended edition of Miss Witham's communications; she could not resist commenting to Mrs. Tatnell on the folly of those Playfairs, with their seven children, and not a sixpence beyond Doctor Playfair's professional income, running the risk of losing such a catch as George Huddlestone,

who really did seem taken with that little wax doll of a girl, Rose. Miss Bradley of course heard the account next, and handed it on to Mrs. Moss. So in the course of two days the two great rivals in the town council were both thoroughly on the alert against the threatened insidious attacks of suggestions for sanitary reform. Whereby is abundantly exemplified the social importance of the female sex, and the disadvantages which occasionally result to the community at large from the holy estate of matrimony. Mrs. Playfair was a most loving and faithful spouse, but had Doctor Playfair been, like the rector, a bachelor, neither Buller nor Moss would ever have had it suggested to their highly appreciative faculties, that if the corporation were only obstinate enough, philanthropy might be induced to undertake their responsibilities for them.

CHAPTER V.

A GLIMPSE OF OLYMPUS.

THE arrival of Mr. Tollmache and his daughter at Wycherley Court was a subject of much interest, and very mingled feelings, in quite another social orbit than that of Monksford. The select few, known under the imposing title of the county families, whose only impression concerning that,—in its own eyes,—important town, was of a place where were collected a number of persons, whose duty it was to have shops, where they themselves could, from time to time, buy such things as they might chance to want,—looked upon the advent of the Tollmaches as an event personally concerning themselves.

"The Tollmaches have arrived at Wycherley, my dear," Sir Myles Jarvis said to Lady Jarvis, at breakfast one morning.

"Indeed!" was the cool rejoinder.

"Yes. I met Haigg yesterday, and he told me so. We must call at once. I remember Tollmache at Harrow. He was a good bit my junior, though."

"I don't see the use of calling until they've had

time to settle a little. It gives me the shivers to think of going into that house. It must be as mouldy and damp as a cellar, and such a wreck and ruin as the whole place is! I can't imagine any one coming to live there."

"And the avenue opening into the very middle of the town too," Miss Jarvis put in: "so horrid. But I believe it is all Miss Tollmache's doing. Clara told me, mother, in her last letter, that she believes she is quite eccentric, and a most determined person; that she makes Mr. Tollmache do just what she likes."

"Dear me, how very objectionable! But I hear she is very handsome."

"I am sure she is not," chimed in the second Miss Jarvis, who, in right of possession of pale hair, ideally termed golden, large light blue eyes, and a pink and white complexion, was held to be the beauty of the family. "I saw her riding one day, the last time I was staying with Clara. Her features are much too marked. Clara said she had heard men rave about her figure, but I could see quite plainly it is all padding. And she may be, as they say, a splendid rider, but I thought she looked just like a professional."

"Well, I suppose we must call some day," Lady Jarvis languidly replied; "but I shall certainly not be in a hurry."

From the tenor of which remarks it may be gathered that Eaglescliff did not regard the Tollmaches' appropriation of Wycherley Court with any marked approbation.

The intelligence of their arrival was on the con-

trary received at Knyaston Grange with unmixed satisfaction, Colonel Pendennis being eagerly urged by his wife to go with her and call without a moment's delay. But then circumstances differed in the two cases. Lady Jarvis had only one son, already married, and four daughters at home. She had been most urgent with Mr. Wycherley, whose acquaintance she had made in Paris, to come and take up his rightful position in the county; and was, of course, much disappointed at her failure in the attempt to induce him to see his responsibilities in their right light. Mrs. Pendennis, on the other hand, had no daughters at all, only three sons, She did not take a patriotic view of the duties of representatives of old families, and considered it much better to have people like the Tollmaches at Wycherley Court, rather than a dissipated Frenchman, who would be sure to teach all the young men in the neighbourhood to drink absinthe, and gamble dreadfully.

Thus opinions were divided; but of course they all trooped in and left their cards at Wycherley Court, making their comments the while on the active renovation which was going on everywhere. Lady Jarvis was of opinion Miss Tollmache must be a young woman possessed of an appalling amount of energy. Mrs. Pendennis thought Mr. Tollmache must be very rich, to spend so largely on a place which was not his own, and wondered whether it were possible he meditated buying it at some future day for his daughter. She had a vivid imagination, and was already beginning to feel as if she had some personal interest in Mr. Tollmache's expenditure of

money in a way not calculated to benefit his daughter's future fortune. Sir Myles Jarvis was disposed to take up the gauntlet on behalf of Miss Tollmache.

"She's an uncommonly handsome girl," he said, as they drove homewards.

Lady Jarvis contentedly surveyed her two slim, slender-waisted daughters on the opposite seat, and responded. "Well, yes, perhaps, if you admire women in that style. I cannot say such marked features are to my taste."

"At any rate, she has a magnificent figure."

This was so undeniable, the canons of taste in form being less adaptable to individual preference than those concerning eyes, features, and complexions, that Lady Jarvis responded more tartly,—

"Magnificently made up, if you like! But we women are not so easily taken in as you men are."

Sir Myles made no reply. The statement had the merit of not being easily disproved; but he remained nevertheless of the same opinion, and would have given heavy odds against the chance of a girl with the bright honest face, and clear steadfast brown eyes of Kate Tollmache, being indebted in any way to art for her appearance.

It was of course only the superior gods and goddesses who could unhesitatingly require the gates of the Monksford Olympus to open for their entrance and exit: the inferior creation could only hover anxiously on the outskirts of Paradise, and lie in wait for favourable opportunities. It was strange how much their sentiments regarding Wycherley Court were coloured by the unusual circumstance

of the entrance gate being in the very centre of the town. It is not too much to say that the position of any inhabitant of the house was seriously affected by the accident of the old elm avenue running in that exact direction. Had it been planted towards any other point of the compass, and the entrance consequently been from some country road, quite apart from the town, the town people would doubtless have regarded the place in the same light as they did any other country house in the neighbourhood,—holding it one to be spied at and chattered about, but not openly assaulted. But as it was, when they saw Mr. and Miss Tollmache daily walking, riding, or driving through their midst; could chronicle who came to stay at the Court, and how long they remained; and could tell how often the county magnates called, and which of the three Pendennises most often rode up the elm avenue,—they felt as if the dwellers at the Court were in some measure fellow citizens, and open to somewhat different treatment from that accorded to more distant Olympians. Mrs. Moss, aggravated by circumstances, revived an old standing grievance, which had more than once marred the domestic harmony of the house, namely, Mr. Moss's obstinate refusal to let the rooms over the shop, and retire to some "villa residence" on the outskirts of the town. As treasurer of a Mother's Benefit Fund, she felt she could have called, with perfect propriety, to ask Miss Tollmache for a subscription. Who could tell but that Miss Tollmache, who was reported to be very charitable, might manifest such a lively interest in the charity, as to wish to see something of its

working, Now, could she only have put "Rose Villa," or "Eglantine Bank," on her card, how gladly would she have called, and how joyously hailed Miss Tollmache's interest, by inviting her to come to her house some day, and inspect the books, and work done by the members of the fund. But how could she find courage to call at Wycherley Court, when the very footman who opened the door would know she lived over the shop from which the tea and sugar came? or face the thought of Miss Tollmache coming to visit her, without shame and confusion of face? Why, it would be almost an insult to offer her even a cup of tea in rooms over a shop! Mrs. Moss grew quite spiteful against even meek little Mrs. Buller, on the strength of her superior advantages in this respect.

"That Buller," she said to her daughter, bewailing the intractability of Mr. Moss, "is just as much in business as your papa, and not half as substantial a man either. Yet because he hasn't actually a shop, he calls himself 'a professional man,' and speaks of your papa as in trade; so vulgar, I call that! And that dowdy little woman, who looks at the best very much like a servant, and isn't much else in truth, by all I hear, can go in and out of her house just like any other lady in the town, without having to pass an odious shop window, and needn't be in a fright when anyone comes to call, lest they should hear them pounding sugar below, or smell the cheese and bacon in the warehouse behind."

Which enumeration of her grievances, aided by the tender sympathy of her daughter, so wrought upon Mrs. Moss, that she melted into tears; and

the border land that night was probably filled with mourning and woe for Mr. Moss. At least, he was reported the next morning in the shop to be "uncommon crusty."

The person most unconscious of all this seething and working in the diminutive ocean of life in which she had made such a very big splash, was Kate Tollmache herself. She was a sadly rebellious being with regard to all such tactics; discerning them with natural acuteness, and venting sharp sarcasms upon them, but treating them as things wholly apart from any course of action possible to herself. She was terribly free and independent: the laudable but mild efforts of her governess to fix her well in the grooves of her proper sphere had proved a sad failure, and her father had always been too easy-going to trouble himself about her proceedings. In vain had his sister-in-law, Lady Clanraven, remonstrated; in vain had deeply interested matrons, widows, and well-matured spinsters, deplored and implored. He said Lady Clanraven was a fool, the matrons fidgets,—and he darkly distrusted the widows and spinsters. Kate was, he declared, healthy and happy, and quite a large enough heiress to be independent. Whereby he showed that his indolent, careless life, had not prevented him from learning some lessons during the course of it.

The girl had therefore been allowed to develope pretty much as she chose, and was as generous, honest, outspoken a woman as could be found in any rank of life, very self reliant, and very impatient of that form of the bondage so graphically described to his hearers by the mayor, which comes

under the head of propriety. She was perpetually inflicting shocks on the susceptibilities of Monksford. One day the talk would be that Miss Tollmache had been seen walking in the town accompanied by an immense bloodhound, which was considered a most unlady-like proceeding: another, that she had appeared in enormously thick boots, quite like men's boots: a third would hear the news that she had dismounted at the gate, left the groom to take her horse home, and had walked about the High Street, shopping in her riding habit, for more than an hour.

These enormities were probably more inimical to the social code of Monksford than they would have been to that of the superior deities, who would have held such proceedings absolutely immaterial, as it could be of no possible consequence what any one did in Monksford. But Kate Tollmache was as careless of Olympian "Shibboleths" as of Monksford proprieties; and though she, of course, possessed by right of birth the freedom of "the county society" around her, it was evident, before she had been long at Wycherley Court, that she would find favour therein far more by reason of her future fortune than of her own personal characteristics. She was too free and independent alike for men and women. The former smarted under a mortifying sense of her evident indifference to their attentions, which it was much easier to declare outwardly was nothing but the insolence of an heiress, than to believe inwardly to be anything else than a perfectly sincere manifestation of feeling; the latter shrank from an innate consciousness that she looked with

scorn and contempt on the thousand little shams and artifices which made up the sum of their daily lives. So they all united in running her down,—men being quite as great adepts as women in the art of running a woman down, so long as she is not sufficiently singed in reputation to render their championship a desirable display of their own superior privileges and advantages over the other sex in the matter of morality. Lady Clanraven invited herself to spend a fortnight at Wycherley Court almost immediately after her brother-in-law's arrival there, while her daughters were in Paris with their father, feeling, she said, that she might be useful to Kate in advising her on various points of household arrangement. She did not appear to find much opportunity of offering such sage counsels, but she drove about the country a good deal, and was so filled with distress at all she heard, that she made another appeal to Mr. Tollmache.

"My dear Horace! I do assure you it is no laughing matter. Kate makes herself terribly unpopular by her independent ways."

"Well, I can't help that."

"But you can; you should really interpose your authority. Lady Jarvis has just been telling me that at the archery meeting last week, she refused to be introduced to Colonel Twyford, who was evidently struck with her, saying openly to Mrs. Pendennis, who was going to introduce him, that she would have nothing to do with him, for she did not see why Lady Dunshannon was to be cut by every one because of that scandal about him, and he made just as much of as ever."

"By Jove, and I'm not sure but's she in the right, too!"

"My dear Horace! that is not the question. We may not entirely approve of many social rules, to which, nevertheless, we are forced to bow. But the point here is, that every one feels it to be really most improper that a girl of Kate's age should have any opinions at all on such a subject; and that her expressing them openly in this way is most damaging to her. Now, though I don't for a moment defend Colonel Twyford in that affair about Lady Dunshannon, it is all past. She, poor thing, has, I believe, gone into a sisterhood or something, so there is no further scandal,—and he is certainly a splendid match for any girl: his fortune is immense, and it is not often, I can tell you, he asks for an introduction to any unmarried woman,—so that Kate's conduct is doubly aggravating. I could quite see the malicious triumph with which Lady Jarvis told me what had passed. She has been trying for long to catch him, and was of course delighted at Kate thus damaging her own prospects. She will never have a chance of a good settlement if she goes on in that way. Colonel Twyford will—"

The sentence was doomed to remain unfinished. The door opened at the moment, and Kate herself entered. Mr. Tollmache was not devoid of a spirit of mischief, and was, moreover, heartily sick of Lady Clanraven's confidences. So, in spite of a hasty sign from her, he spoke with assumed gravity.

"Kate, what is this I hear of you?"

"Of me, father?" and she looked at him with earnest, questioning eyes.

"Yes. Here is your aunt come home with a dreadful tale of your enormities. How you refused an introduction to Colonel Twyford last week."

Kate's nostril curled slightly. "Did Aunt Gwendolyn tell you my reasons?"

"Yes; and she thinks them highly improper ones for a young woman to give; and that as all scandal is over, Lady Dunshannon relegated to oblivion, and Colonel Twyford immensely rich, and not prone to honour young women with much notice, it was most undesirable that you, a young woman as yet unprovided with a matrimonial settlement, should injure your prospects by being so outspoken. I think that is about your case, Gwendolyn? so now you and Kate can settle it between you."

With that he rose, yawned, and sauntered out of the room. Kate's face had flushed crimson, and there was a dangerous glitter in her eyes as she looked full at Lady Clanraven.

"Is that really what you said, Aunt Gwendolyn? or is my father joking?"

"My dear Kate! I consider your blunt way of expressing opinions—"

"Excuse my interrupting you, aunt, but that is no answer to my question. Did my father correctly repeat what you had said?"

"Well, in the main, yes. I did not, of course, put it in quite so blunt a form."

"No, of course not. The sentiment was wrapped up, doubtless, in rose leaves. But he expressed your opinion?"

"Yes."

"Do you know, Aunt Gwendolyn, that Lady Dunshannon is one of my dearest friends?"

"My dear Kate, say 'was.'"

"No," replied the girl proudly, "*is*. I say it advisedly. I don't cast off my friends if they wilfully do wrong. What right have I to judge them? Still less when they are cruelly wronged, as was poor Caroline. Had she been a worse woman, she would have come better out of that affair, in the eyes of the world, for she would have gone on deceiving her husband. She had not sufficient deceit in her for that, and then, finding discovery inevitable, in desperation she ran away with Colonel Twyford, who, had he one spark of honourable feeling left in his infamous nature, would offer her marriage at once, now Lord Dunshannon is dead."

"That is not in the least to be expected. Colonel Twyford could not be expected to make a woman who had run away from her husband his wife. Of course, it was only because she had forfeited all claim to respect, that he dared to propose elopement to her."

"Yes; it would be a sad loss to all girls in the market did he honourably offer to marry her, would it not?" Kate asked, in a slow, hard tone.

Lady Clanraven coloured. "There is no occasion to discuss the case," she said. "As I said to your father, it is most unbecoming in a girl of your age to have any opinions on such subjects, and really indecent that you should openly express them. You would positively lead one to fear that your partizan-

ship of Lady Dunshannon arises from lax ideas on moral questions."

"And to what, then, would your partizanship of Colonel Twyford be due? Are you anxious to have him for a son-in-law, Aunt Gwendolyn? If so, pray send Gertrude and Eleanor here. I cannot promise to ask him to meet them; but he, and a good many more of his stamp, are frequently to be found at Ripley Lodge. Mrs. Mostyn would be delighted to see the girls, as often as they chose to go there."

She turned and left the room as she spoke.

It is only fair to say that she afterwards apologised to Lady Clanraven for her last speech, admitting that she had lost her temper; an admission which Lady Clanraven might also have very justly made. It need hardly be said that Mr. Tollmache had gained his point. Lady Clanraven troubled him no more on the subject of Kate's proceedings, and entirely renounced all interference with her headstrong niece, consoling herself with evil prognostications on her account.

"I should really be thankful," she said to Lord Clanraven, "to hear of her making any sort of marriage which would not be a positive disgrace to the family. I could really wish there was a handsome curate there. Clergymen are always respectable, and generally fairly connected. I quite tremble for what she may do."

There were great searchings of heart in Monksford on the subject of calling on Miss Tollmache. Had they all stood on the same social level, there would probably have been no great difficulty in arriving at a conclusion upon the subject. The

professional element would have been quite ready to admit that the Tollmaches held a different social position from their own, and might perhaps resent proffers of acquaintance, but for the dread that this admission would seem to place them on the same level with the trade element, from whom any attempt at acquaintanceship would, of course, be positive insolence. Miss Bradley, in right of her relationship to the rector, suggested the propriety of her calling at the Court; but this he at once negatived, with more promptness than was usual with him regarding any such point.

"I am bound, as rector, to call, but my visit will be simply a professional one. Any further proffers of acquaintanceship must come from them, not from us. I have never yet sought to push my way into the houses of people in a higher position than my own, and I am not going to begin now."

While all the rest were hovering in uncertainty, no one, in fact, liking to take the first step, Rose Playfair again achieved a triumph in connection with Wycherley Court. Mrs. Bell, the housekeeper, worn out with her labours in settling the family, or the victim of damp beds, or some other peril besetting a lonely, uninhabited house, after ailing and grumbling for some time, at last declared herself to be very ill, took to her bed, and sent for Doctor Playfair. Rose was in the room when the message arrived.

"Oh, papa," she exclaimed, "do take me with you. I can hold Brownie while you are in the house. I should so like to see all they have been doing to the grounds."

Doctor Playfair readily assented. He was very fond of his pretty Rose, and often took her with him on his professional rounds. Rose was in ecstacy as they drove up to the Court. She had never seen it save in its deserted desolation, and had always regarded it as the very incarnation of dreary loneliness. Now the moss-grown road was hard and firm, with clear cut margins; the shrubberies, freely shorn of their luxuriant overgrowth, only needed time to regain the beauty for which they had once been famed; the terrace had recovered a smoothness almost miraculous in so short a time; the steps were cleared, the vases replaced, the garden below was in rapid course of restoration; and every available place already glowing with bright summer flowers.

As they drove up to the door, however, she began to feel some dread creeping over her. Would magnificent footmen in gorgeous liveries appear at Doctor Playfair's summons, stare insolently at her, and perhaps stand talking together at the open door, as though she were only a servant holding the doctor's horse? She began to wish she had not come.

She was greatly relieved when a quiet, civil-looking man appeared, who, after admitting Doctor Playfair, looked at her for a moment hesitatingly, but with anything rather than insolence, and then asked if the young lady would not come in? He would send some one to hold the horse.

"No, no; my daughter will stay in the gig, thank you," her father answered, rather hastily. He had

no mind to appear as if seeking to make an indirect use of professional opportunities.

So Rose was left outside to amuse herself with furtive peeps into the hall, which looked quite splendid, she thought, fitted up just like a sitting room, it seemed to her. She had glimpses of an old carved oak table, with a magnificent fern in a pot standing upon it, and of chairs with embossed crimson velvet seats, and a curiously-carved sofa. And there were plants and flowering shrubs all about. It did not look to her in the least like a hall—a great bare place where hats and coats hung.

The associations of the place soon carried her thoughts away to Mr. Wycherley, and she fell into a reverie. Surely if he had known how beautiful the Court could be made to look, he would have come to live there! And if he had——? His admiring glance seemed to rise before her again. Well, what might have happened? She had read a good many novels, so was quite prepared to expect wonderful results from the allurements of bright eyes, pretty features, and beautiful complexion and hair. But, then, Mr. Wycherley had not come; she wondered if he knew Mr. Tollmache? and whether he would ever come to see him? Then her thoughts wandered away to George Huddlestone—"poor George," as she often rather ominously styled him in her thoughts. She felt certain that he would soon propose, and she had quite made up her mind that she would accept him, only she did wish he had been a little taller and thinner, and more careful about his appearance, —more like some of the officers from Willesbury, who occasionally strayed over to Monksford, and who

were always so beautifully dressed, and had such a distinguished look,—such a contrast to George's careless air and dress, and somewhat heavy slouching walk!

"Is that Miss Playfair?"

This question, softly asked close at her side, made Rose start violently. It was Miss Tollmache herself who spoke, and she was standing in the open doorway. Kate had, in fact, been quietly watching Rose for some time. From a small morning room, the window of which commanded a view of the hall door, she had seen the arrival, guessed at once who it was, and after Doctor Playfair had entered the house, continued to watch the girl, whose fair face, with its almost childlike beauty and artless expression, attracted her not a little. It was only when aware of admiration that a certain conscious look detracted from Rose Playfair's beauty; the expression was not permanent. When she did not feel herself observed, it was a very sweet, simple face, and the slightly pensive thoughtfulness which cast a faint shadow upon it, as she mused over the shortcomings of "poor George," added a charm to it.

Miss Tollmache felt a growing interest in the girl as she watched her, and forthwith resolving to make acquaintance with her, crossed the hall to the open door so softly, that Rose, sunk in her reverie, was quite unconscious of her approach until she spoke.

"I did not mean to startle you," Kate said: "but I want you to come in. Good Mrs. Bell, when once she captures a doctor, does not soon relinquish her prey. I fear you will have some time to wait."

"Oh, thank you, I don't mind," replied Rose, half frightened, and yet reassured by the beautiful eyes and sweet smile of the great lady. "I often go with papa. I think he would like me to stay in the gig."

"But I should like you to come in," Kate replied, with a peremptoriness tinged with sufficient playfulness to rescue it from appearing dictatorial. "A groom shall hold the horse. You must come and see my little conservatory. It has just been filled, and looks charming."

She rang the bell as she spoke, and ordering a groom to be sent, herself helped Rose down from the gig, and led the way to the drawing-room.

Rose followed, wondering whether she was really awake or dreaming; and as she entered the drawing room, uttered an audible exclamation of delighted surprise. The fitting up seemed very wonderful to her, accustomed only to the solid but somewhat sombre comfort of the drawing-room at The Hall, to the faded chintz covers at home, or to the much gilded splendours which, on state occasions, were disentombed from careful wrappings, and allowed to behold the light of day through undarkened windows in Monksford. Still it was more than anything the sense of contrast which struck her.

"Oh, how changed!" she said.

"You know the room, then?" Miss Tollmache asked.

"Oh, yes! When we were all quite little children, we used to come sometimes and spend an afternoon here with Mr. Haigg's children, and play hide-and-seek; and then old Mrs. Fothergill, who took care

of the house, used to give us tea. It was great fun, but mamma stopped it at last, because the dust was so dreadful, it quite ruined our clothes, she said. How beautiful you have made it!"

"Do you like it? My aunt found fault with everything."

"How could she?"

"Some people are apt at the accomplishment. But come and see my flowers. You have a garden, I suppose?"

"Yes, but only quite a common one. Our man has not much time to attend to it, with the two horses to look after, and having sometimes to go out with papa."

"Then I must give you some flowers,"—and she took her basket and scissors with her, and cut liberally, talking to Rose the while, who watched in silent admiration, noting, with feminine quickness, the beautiful arrangement of the splendid hair, the perfect fit of the simple morning gown, and the costliness of one or two plain massive ornaments; and thinking to herself that Miss Tollmache was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

"Now I must take you over the house," Kate said, when the cutting was finished. "If you knew it so well in its desolation, it will amuse you to see how changed everything is."

Rose's bewilderment increased. She would have thought it quite a compliment if Miss Tollmache had sent a servant to beg that she would come in, and had allowed her to sit and wait for her father in some untenanted library or drawing-room. And

here she was receiving beautiful flowers, and going all over the house with Miss Tollmache herself.

"Oh, it is all beautiful!" she said, "and so comfortable. I think it is much nicer than Wyvern Abbey. Do you know Wyvern, Miss Tollmache?"

"Yes, I have stayed there."

This almost frightened Rose back into her shell again. Could it be that this kind, friendly lady, who talked so pleasantly, was one who actually stayed at Wyvern Abbey, a guest of the Duchess of Bermondsey! who, in the eyes of Monksford, was the greatest lady in the world!

"I have seen Wyvern," she said timidly. "You know, when the Duke is not there, people are allowed to go over the house. It is very splendid, but I always think it looks a little dreary; not as if it was anyone's home. I like this house much better."

They were entering the hall as she spoke, and Doctor Playfair's appearance at the moment from the opposite direction prevented any reply. He looked not a little astonished at the sight of his daughter in company with Miss Tollmache, and carrying a basket of beautiful hothouse flowers. Kate greeted him with a touch of stateliness, which had been absent from her manner to Rose.

"You see I have been making acquaintance with your daughter, Doctor Playfair, and I hope she has been better amused than I fear you can have been by poor dear Bell's voluble description of her symptoms."

"You are very kind, Miss Tollmache, I am sure;

but indeed I had no intention of pressing Rose on your acquaintance."

"No; so I was obliged to introduce myself, by startling Miss Playfair dreadfully. But now that we have made acquaintance," she added, turning to Rose, "I hope you will come and see me sometimes. I shall be very pleased to see you."

"I shall be so glad to come," Rose simply answered. She could hardly contain her delighted excitement until they had driven away from the house.

"Oh, papa! isn't she beautiful? I wasn't wrong to go in, was I? She came and asked me herself. I couldn't refuse."

"No, you did quite right, my love."

"And she is so kind; just look at the flowers. I felt so frightened at first, but she soon made me feel quite at home. Oh, I like her so much, and I am so glad she has asked me to go and see her again."

Doctor Playfair was little less delighted than his daughter. Does anyone doubt that Monksford had many little stings and stabs in store for the hard-worked doctor, who, with a small income and a large family, could not afford to resent insolence or indignities from actual or even possible patients? Now, his pretty Rose had achieved a success which would make all the town envious. Invited by Miss Tollmache herself to come in, and to repeat her visit! What might not come of it in the future? The wife of George Huddlestone, and intimate at Wycherley Court, she would be able to hold her own with the best of them; and what an advantage, too,

for her younger sisters. Doctor Playfair felt as much cheered as if he had been summoned to attend two or three new and wealthy patients.

"Who was that pretty little girl you had with you this morning?" Mr. Tollmache asked, when he and his daughter met at luncheon.

"Miss Playfair, the doctor's daughter."

"What! did he bring her to call?"

"Not at all; he left her outside. I went and brought her in."

"What on earth did you do that for?"

"I saw her from the window, and was taken by her looks. She is a pretty little thing. In fact I wanted a little tonic after my late dose of Aunt Gwendolyn, a breath of pure fresh air, you know, to revive me after the heavy scent of costly perfumes!"

Mr. Tollmache laughed, and shrugged his shoulders. He did not see what Kate could possibly want with the doctor's daughter. It seemed an odd taste to him, but he supposed it was one of her fancies.

Mrs. Playfair could hardly believe Rose's tale when she reached home. To have actually made Miss Tollmache's acquaintance before anyone else in the town! And to be asked to go and see her again!

"Well, you are a fortunate girl, Rose. I only wish I had dreamed of such a thing, that I might have told you to put on your best hat. I'm afraid Miss Tollmache must have thought you very shabby."

"I don't believe she ever noticed what I had on."

Rose replied, with intuitive perception that Miss Tollmache would see very little difference between her best hat and her worst.

But it is not to be supposed such a triumph was without alloy. Neither Mrs. Playfair nor Rose were in the least likely to leave it unproclaimed; and then Monksford gallantly rose to the requirements of the situation.

"I never did see anything like the impudence of those Playfairs!" Mrs. Moss exclaimed; "giving themselves such airs, as being professional people, forsooth! Business is business, of course; but after all, it's only a question of being paid for one thing instead of another; and by all that's said, the sale of drugs means something more than fair profit. To my thinking, too, I may say, a business man who has all things handsome about him, and a good balance at his banker's, is a deal better off than a professional man, who scarce knows how to find his wife and children food to eat, or clothes to their backs; and that's just about the case with those Playfairs, or I'm much mistaken. And now to go and try to make use of that waxy-faced girl to push themselves in at the Court! I call it downright low. Well, thank heaven, I've too much independence to try any such mean shifts!"

Mrs. Collier, the wife of the principal lawyer in Monksford, looked at the subject from the opposite side, and thought Miss Tollmache would soon tire of her new *protégeé*, when she found out what a vain little flirt the girl was. Mrs. Tatnell delivered her opinion with all the calm decision of a thoroughly competent judge.

"Most unbecoming conduct! I have often heard my late dear husband say, that nothing could be more unjustifiable than for a medical man to make use of his professional opportunities to push on private acquaintance."

"But he didn't take Rose to call," suggested Mrs. Buller, who did occasionally raise a feeble voice in defence of sinners. "He only took her in the gig, and left her outside. I'm sure she very often drives about with him. It was Miss Tollmache insisted on her coming in."

Mrs. Tatnell bestowed a contemptuous glance on the feeble champion of the defamed.

"Of course, he never calculated on such a chance! Oh no, of course not! I can only say, I am sure if poor dear Dr. Tatnell had known what sort of people these Playfairs are, he'd never have sold him the practice."

This remark, of course, went straight as a rifle bullet to Mrs. Playfair, who laughed a little shrill angry laugh, as she retorted that she was sure she wished he had kept his practice to himself. That he would have been an honester man if he had either done so, or represented it at its true value.

This piece of news formed part of Miss Bradley's budget of information for the rector when he came into the drawing-room from his study for his evening cup of tea, when he generally brought the paper, and returned random replies to her outpourings while he glanced over the news. On this occasion, however, she noticed that he laid aside the paper, and was evidently listening, as she detailed Rose Playfair's great triumph, with all the Monksford comments.

"Miss Tollmache asked her to go in, did she?" he said.

"Yes, and gave her some beautiful flowers, and begged her to go and see her again."

He smiled a smile of some meaning it seemed to Miss Bradley, but he only remarked quietly,—

"A capital thing for little Rose. She's a nice little girl."

He said no more. Nevertheless, Miss Bradley, furtively watching him, saw that he did not resume his study of the paper for some time, but sat gazing out of the window. She noticed that his face was bright, seeming to reflect the glow of some great inward satisfaction, and a great dread seized upon his watchful guardian. Could that scheming little Rose have been laying successful snares for her cousin's heart? Why else should he feel any interest in her being thus, in Monksford phraseology, "taken up" by Miss Tollmache?

CHAPTER VI.

UNJUSTIFIABLE CAPRICES OF PROVIDENCE.

ONE of those opportunities of turning general acquaintance with his neighbour's affairs to good account for his own advantage, had occurred to Mr. Octavius Buller in the days when he lived in a small back street in Monksford, ere success had stimulated his ambition to more exalted flights than the mere pursuit of wealth. It is true this stroke of good luck had been afterwards so cruelly dashed by ill-merited disaster, that it had proved itself a very Sodom apple. Still, as the unfortunate results were purely accidental, it held good as a proof of the benefit of keeping yourself well informed respecting your neighbour's concerns. An acquaintance of Mr. Buller's, carrying on business as a wine merchant in Monksford, came to him one day with a common tale—a heavy loss, followed by an unexpected call, in consequence of the failure of a house with which he had dealings. Could Mr. Buller help him to raise a considerable sum on the security of a small stock of particularly fine old wine in his

cellars? Mr. Buller, planting himself on the hearth rug, contemplated his immaculate boots with an air of profound solemnity.

"Money is very scarce just now," he said.

"I know it. But I must have it at any price. Can't you do the thing yourself, Buller? The wine is worth treble the amount for which I offer it as security."

"It's not a sort of security I like, though," replied Mr. Buller, calculating possible contingencies. "But I'll tell you what I'll do. I want to lay down a little fine wine. I'll take the whole lot off you at so much a-dozen, and undertake that it shall lie undisturbed for six months. If you can within that time redeem it at the same price, good; if not, at the end of the six months it shall become *bona fide* mine."

The bargain was struck; the wine removed to Mr. Buller's cellars. In little more than three months, the unfortunate wine merchant's bankruptcy was declared, a catastrophe which Mr. Buller happened to know was inevitable when he made the bargain. He sold about half the quantity of wine for nearly double the price he had given for the whole, and found himself with the capital invested almost doubled, and a good stock of very choice wine in his possession to boot. This manifestation of providential guidance in the conduct of his affairs so moved Mr. Buller's gratitude, that he sent a donation of five pounds to the local hospital, desiring that it should be recorded as a thankoffering for divine blessings!

His gratitude turned out premature. Providence

by some means, managed to let slip his interests in respect of this transaction. When he built his new house in the High Street, with its back windows overlooking the finely wooded park surrounding Wycherley Court, he had been much disturbed about the moving of that wine, and had at last applied to Mr. Corbett, a wine merchant in the town, who had taken up the business of his unfortunate creditor, for the services of an experienced cellarman in his employment, who was himself a tenant of one of Mr. Buller's houses in River Row. The man was sent, and the work of removal went on satisfactorily until just at the last, when he slipped at the top of a steep awkward ladder, and fell the whole way into the cellar, coming down with violence among a number of empty casks. The office boy rushed breathless into the town hall, where Mr. Buller was occupied, with the news.

"Is any of the wine lost?" was the first question which rose to Mr. Buller's lips, but he checked it just in time, and only exclaimed, "Good God!" and turned pale. The man was married, and had a large family. Should the accident end fatally, that would prove even a more serious consideration than the loss of a few dozens of good wine.

The man did not die, but he behaved in a manner nearly as injurious to Mr. Buller's interests. He came out of the hospital, after many weeks, in such a condition, that it was very evident he would never again be able to do a day's work, save of the very lightest kind. In all, save the sentimental view of the case, Mrs. Parker might as well have been a widow, for she would have to keep her children. If

her husband managed to keep himself in food and clothes, it was the utmost he could do.

Mrs. Parker was a rough, active, hard-working Irishwoman, and buckled manfully to her task. But this line of conduct by no means fell in with the views of Mr. Buller, so he sent for her one day to his office. His demeanour was very majestic on this occasion, and his loud strident tones asserted Octavius Buller more palpably than usual. These symptoms always indicated his entire pre-occupation with what he called important business, but what Mr. Moss was wont to describe as special iniquity. He affirmed that he could always tell if Buller was bent upon any special piece of rascality, by his extra pomposity and self-importance, even going so far as to declare that he had detected and exposed an infamous job which Buller had tried to foist upon the town council, merely in consequence of the extent to which his suspicions were aroused by the great man's manner when suggesting the transaction.

Mr. Buller expressed the deepest sympathy with Mrs. Parker's misfortunes, and after emphatically assuring her of his disinterested wish to advise her for the best, proceeded to point out how useless it was for her to struggle against this afflictive dispensation of Providence, which distinctly pointed out the workhouse as her proper destination. Her efforts to support her husband and children must prove a failure, and could only render her meanwhile a struggling dependent on precarious charity, always a degrading position, destructive of all self-respect. He had intended further to explain to her how the workhouse was really a place of honourable retire-

ment for those on whom Providence had laid such a chastening hand, a discredit alone to those who sought in it a refuge from honest industry; but his benevolent intentions were unexpectedly frustrated. Mrs. Parker possessed to the full the Irish gift of readiness of tongue. She suddenly cut short Mr. Buller's harangue by rising, with heightened colour and flashing eyes, and then and there informing him that he was a "mean, hungry hound," and need not suppose she didn't see through his purpose, and how he wanted to escape doing anything for the man who had been injured in his house; but that as long as she'd good health and strong limbs, no husband or child of hers should see the inside of the workhouse; and that as far as charity was concerned, she wanted no one's charity, though she'd be very grateful to any lady or gentleman who'd kindly put any light jobs in her husband's way, and help her to work of any sort which might enable them to pay their way and keep a home for their children. She didn't forget they were Mr. Buller's tenants,—they weren't likely to be allowed to forget that as long as there were ways existing whereby a landlord could defraud his tenants by law, and, if he liked, he could turn them out, and see if that would help to raise his character in the town.

With that she turned and abruptly quitted the office. Mr. Buller was clearly worsted; his carefully chosen words had no chance against the untutored eloquence of the angry wife and mother. He had just advanced to the dignity of employing a clerk, as well as the office boy, heretofore his only assistant, and he was wont to speak of "my clerk" with

much pomp and circumstance. Now, however, he was doomed to experience the perils of greatness, for the partition between the inner and outer office was thin; and as the irate Mrs. Parker banged out of the room, he had the pleasure of beholding both his subordinates in convulsions of laughter, and of knowing that before night half Monksford would hear what his strenuous advocacy of Christian duty had brought upon him.

He did not eject the Parkers. Mrs. Moss said he dared not; he himself averred that he could not allow the woman's insolence to influence his conduct in any way. And so potent in him was the spirit of Christian forgiveness, that when the rector and Mrs. Huddlestone set a subscription going to start Mrs. Parker in laundry work, he generously contributed five shillings, charging it in his mental accounts as a deduction from his commercial profits in his former benefaction to his struggling friend. He even went further; for when, soon after, he raised all the other rents in River Row, he left the Parkers' rent unaltered.

It was from the date of Mr. Buller's entrance upon possession of his new house in the High Street, that those more exalted flights of ambition, to which allusion has been made, began to occupy his thoughts. He felt that success in business had now lifted him a step nearer to the position in life which was his by right. Why should it not carry him higher, and yet higher? These were at first but those vague longings for yet more, which form the poisoning drop of bitterness in the cup of all earthly success. Ten years before he would have said that, with a handsomely furnished house in the High Street, "my

clerk" in constant attendance at "my office," and the balance which now stood to his credit at the bank, he would be well content. And now? He had gained what had appeared to be the hill top, and behold, there rose before him a yet higher point! Why should not the successful man of business become a man of landed influence in the county? He called it a "county man;" his perception of subtle distinctions not being sufficiently acute to detect the difference between these two forms of expression.

Gradually, as evening after evening he sat smoking his cigar, and watching from his dining-room windows the shadows of the great elms and beeches lengthening across the sunny turf in the Wycherley park, these aspirations to a position beyond what the mere possession of money could give, took definite form and shape. That place, he said to himself, would inevitably come into the market some day or other. Mr. Wycherley would never return to live at it, nor was it likely that the position of an English country squire, in a thoroughly rural district, would ever have any attraction for his son,—a man French in all but name, and brought up from childhood amidst all the brilliancy and excitement of a Parisian life. The property was fast going to wreck and ruin. Ten years before Mr. Wycherley's death, Mr. Buller could confidently affirm that it would require very careful management to get it into good order again; and every subsequent year as it passed saw the neglect and disorder growing more serious. Yes, sooner or later Wycherley Court would be for sale, and for sale at a comparatively low figure. A host of

thoughts came crowding into Mr. Buller's mind; and before very long a settled determination there formed itself that he would end his days as Octavius Buller, Esquire of Wycherley Court!

In spite, therefore, of increasing wealth, the screwing grasping and grinding process went on more unremittingly than ever, in all points, that is to say, save those which personally concerned his own comfort. The servants were as grudgingly paid and as scantily fed as of yore; his clerk's salary was as carefully ground down to the lowest point at which he could be induced to remain; Mrs. Buller was as jealously watched in all matters of house or personal expenditure. The household in Bridge Street had consisted of one general servant, and a boy who cleaned knives and boots, and worked in the garden. When they moved into the High Street, meek little Mrs. Buller made a timid appeal for another servant. Mr. Buller immediately fixed upon her one of those stony glares which she knew so well.

"Really, Octavius," she pleaded, "we've quite work for a house and parlour maid, the house is so much larger."

"Indeed, and pray what's to prevent you from doing the extra work yourself?" he asked, in tones reserved specially for his wife, and in which the hypercritical might have said that his usual pompous self-assertion degenerated into something very like coarse brutality.

"Of course, I could do it, if you wish it, Octavius; but I thought that now—"

"Then understand that I do wish it," he interrupted. "Do you suppose this house was built and

furnished for nothing? You'll please to be as careful as possible. By the bye, I saw a wine glass on the kitchen table last night, which appeared to have had wine in it. What did that mean?"

"Jane had such a bad cold, I gave her a little hot wine and water before she went to bed."

"Oh! then you'll not do so again. If Jane chooses to indulge in bad colds, she can just pay for physicking for herself."

It was only in such points as an occasional pleasure trip for himself, or some luxury for the table which he specially loved, that Mr. Buller occasionally relaxed a little; and in this latter point he generally contrived to provide some dainty or some wine which his wife did not like.

With such aims and objects in view, the Parkers were a constant nightmare to his prosperity. Full fifteen shillings a-quarter he would have advanced the rent upon any other tenant. Three pounds a-year he was losing, all because that stupid fool could not stand steady on a ladder. Yet he dared not turn them out. At first he did not give the matter much thought, calculating that they must soon come to the workhouse; but when it appeared that the exertions of Mrs. Huddlestone, Miss Witham, and others, had secured a good laundry business for Mrs. Parker, and that Mr. Huddlestone constantly found stray pieces of light work for her husband, and that each quarter day, as it came round, found them ready with the rent, Mr. Buller cursed them all round.

The letting of Wycherley Court to Mr. Tollmache had been another instance in which Mr. Buller's

fellow creatures had failed in fulfilling the legitimate object of their existence, by devoting themselves to the furtherance of his designs. He had securely reckoned that the succession of young Wycherley would rather facilitate than otherwise the ruin of the property, only dreading lest the final catastrophe might be thus brought to pass sooner than would quite suit his own purposes. The possibility of a tenant being found for the place had not occurred to him. And now, here was one of those well-born fools in possession, who never knew the value of money, and who was spending a great deal in a way calculated to advantage his landlord far more than himself. Mr. Wycherley was in receipt of an augmented income, and the value of the property would increase rather than decrease under Mr. Tollmache's reckless expenditure. Mr. Buller felt himself a hardly-used man. If his projects were not frustrated, their fulfilment might be postponed for years; perhaps until old age had robbed success of half its value.

Under these circumstances, when he heard from Mrs. Buller that the drainage question had been under discussion at the mayor's house again, in consequence of a fresh access of fever in the low parts of the town, his temper was just in that state of inflammation which rendered any irritating information especially galling; and he saw in this fresh subject of annoyance, a more serious danger, in some respects, to his prosperity than the state of matters with regard to Wycherley Court. The advent of Mr. Tollmache menaced only his hopes; a serious move in the drainage question would strike a blow at his actual

possessions. The first step would inevitably be an official survey, which would undoubtedly be specially directed towards the streets in the immediate neighbourhood of the river, a proceeding to which Mr. Octavius Buller, as the ground landlord of several houses in that part of the town, and as consequently personally responsible for their condition with respect to drainage, had a very strong objection. His pocket would suffer heavily; and if certain facts of which he was very well aware were ferreted out, his reputation would not escape unscathed. Moss and others would be quick enough to be down upon him, and the former would not be slow to take advantage of any imputations which might be cast upon him in that contest for the churchwardenship next Easter, for which both were silently preparing, and on his success in which Mr. Buller counted a good deal. The church at Monksford was a very old parish church, in which various county families round had rights and interests. As parish churchwarden, he could not fail to be brought from time to time into contact with them on matters of business. He became, in fact, in a measure the official guardian of those rights and interests.

The more Mr. Octavius Buller reflected on all these adverse circumstances, actual and possible, the more did he feel that Providence had meanly abandoned his cause, after being substantially rewarded for former favours; and the more did he regard the Parkers as his special thorn in the flesh. It was three years since he had raised his rents in River Row. Nine pounds had those people already cost him! But that was not at the moment his chief

count against them. Mrs. Parker, as he knew to his cost, could be outspoken when her prospects looked very dark. She was little likely to prove less so when she had found friends, and was managing to make all ends meet. Now, of all the houses belonging to him, the one tenanted by the Parkers was just the one in which that disgraceful state of the drainage which affected them all was most apparent. If this question were stirred up afresh, some of those fussy people who were always chattering about sanitary reform, would be sure to go prying into the business, and Mrs. Parker would very soon speak out. It behoved him to examine a little into the matter; but Mr. Buller, though very trustful to Providence in all cases of infection for other people, never risked his own safety on such points, so did not care to adventure himself in the neighbourhood of River Row, but cast about for a chance of communicating with the Parkers without going near their dwelling, fully intending to give them to understand that it was his purpose immediately to take some steps regarding the drainage of their house, hoping thereby to secure their silence, should unpleasant investigations be set on foot.

He was somewhat puzzled how to get at them, for he did not care to send either the office boy or a servant, who might bring infection back to himself. At last the brilliant suggestion presented itself of going round by the parish schools on his way to his office, and leaving a note, requesting Parker to come and see him in the evening, to be sent by one of the children.

The schoolmaster hesitated when the great Octa-

vius had explained his wishes with condescending urbanity.

"I hardly think I can oblige you, Mr. Buller," he said. "The Parkers are not here, and I don't think I should be justified in sending one of the other children to the house."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard such reports three days since, that I felt bound to send the children home, with a note to say that I could not let them continue to attend school without a doctor's certificate authorising me to do so. No notice has been taken, and they haven't been since."

"Do you mean typhoid fever is there?"

"Scarlet, I'm afraid, by what I heard. It was that made me so anxious. It's such a terrible risk in a school."

"Good God! and they sent the children without saying anything? Infamous!" exclaimed Mr. Buller, who indulged a good deal in the habit of colouring up his remarks with expletory phrases of a more violent than reverent character. "I never heard of such unprincipled conduct."

"They are very ignorant people, Mr. Buller. They don't know the risk themselves."

"Then they must be made to know that their ignorance cannot be allowed to imperil the welfare of others. Good heavens! and that woman takes in washing. Why, the infection might be spread to the best parts of the town. This matter must be thoroughly investigated at once. Good morning, Mr. Townshend."

It hardly seemed as though the ample doorway

of the school was large enough to give passage to all the greatness of Mr. Octavius Buller, who appeared, as he stalked down the school, with his feet even farther apart than usual, to be positively swelling with virtuous and public-spirited indignation against the heinous sinners who, in the lust of selfish aggrandisement, were at that moment, probably, risking the lives of their unsuspecting employers. Why, even Mrs. Buller herself occasionally sent a few things to Mrs. Parker to be washed, when requiring any extra work to be done! The office saw not its great head that day. He strode straight home.

"Louisa!" he called, in his most deep-mouthed tone, the moment he entered the house. "Louisa, come here, directly!"

Mrs. Buller, somewhat dishevelled and heated in appearance, came from the direction of the kitchen, and followed her husband into the dining-room.

"Has that woman Parker got any of our linen to wash just now?"

"I'm not quite sure, Octavius. I told Jane she might—"

"Go and see directly."

Mrs. Buller obeyed without any attempt to finish her sentence. In a few moments she re-entered carrying a tray, upon which some house and table linen was lying.

"She had only these few things. They've just come back."

"My God, woman!" he almost screamed, hastily retreating to the farthest corner of the room, "don't bring them here! They've got scarlet fever in the

house! Put them down, you fool! you'll be bringing me the infection next! Call Jane to take them out into the garden. No,—the boy; he doesn't come near me. Ring the bell, can't you?"

He rushed at the bell himself, before Mrs. Buller had time to put down her terrible burden. His excited tones and violent pealing of the bell brought both Jane and the boy simultaneously,—the former convinced the house was on fire, the latter speculating, boy-like, on the chance that something was up, which might give rise to a lark. With a grin he carried off the fatal tray, while Jane retired with a toss of her head, muttering—

"Serve him right, if he did get the fever, old curmudgeon!"

In a trice Mr. Buller was off to the health-officer of the town, Mr. Smithson, a surgeon, striving with but limited success to make a livelihood out of the physical sufferings of Monksford, and a terrible source of anxious watchfulness to Doctor Playfair. His scanty profits had brought him, like a good many other people in the town, somewhat heavily into Mr. Buller's debt, a circumstance which he was not allowed to forget.

"You'll oblige me extremely, Smithson, if you'll just go down at once and look into the matter. I feel it to be one of great importance. I—I—think, if you'll be so good as to change your clothes afterwards, there could be no danger in your coming to me, at my own house, to report how you find things. I feel it a duty one owes to society to be extremely careful."

Mr. Smithson flushed slightly;—but—he owed

Buller money, and could not pay it. Dare any one assert that self-respect is a plant which can flourish in the choking atmosphere of debts which cannot be cleared off?

Mr. Smithson came with his report, and was hospitably invited to drink a glass of indifferent sherry, at as great a distance from Mr. Buller as the dimensions of the room would allow, while he stated the result of his visit.

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Buller, there can be no doubt about the matter. Three children are down with scarlet fever, of a bad type, too. I don't think there's a chance for two of them."

"And that infernal woman still doing her laundry work!" Mr. Buller almost yelled.

Mr. Smithson sighed.

"It's very wrong, of course," he said; "but, poor thing, she seems very ignorant. I don't believe she has the least suspicion of the extent of the danger, and her husband and eight children are mainly dependent upon her for their bread."

"My dear Smithson, they ought to have gone to the workhouse. I said so at the time of Parker's accident. And so they must have done, but for the folly of some of these sentimental philanthropists. I hope now they'll see what they've done. Just putting a premium on the selfish determination of such people to prey upon their betters. This is the way they reward those who help them. I'm not free from blame myself, I admit. I've perhaps done more for them than any other single individual in the town. For the last three years they've had that house at a much lower rental than I could have

secured for it. But there must be an end of this. I for one will be no supporter of such infamous conduct."

Mr. Smithson was by nature an honest, kind-hearted man. Mrs. Parker, in the bitterness of her harassed soul, when she found concealment no longer possible, had revealed a good deal to him, and said some things which Mr. Octavius Buller might scarcely have cared to hear. And Mr. Smithson felt his burden of debt weigh like a millstone round his neck. What could he do but be silent?

Resplendent in all the glory of his heroic determination to avert from his townsmen the perils of pestilence, Mr. Buller stalked forth that afternoon, to make known far and wide that scarlet fever, in a virulent form, was raging in the house of Mrs. Parker, the laundress. When Monday came, the poor woman had time enough to bestow upon her sick children, for there was no linen to wash. They had just paid their way, no more; so there was nothing but sickness and expense in the house, and the scanty stream of earnings wholly cut off. Yet more. On Saturday evening, Parker had received a note from Mr. Buller, the half of which he did not understand; but the purpose of which was to expound that Mr. Buller considered it a duty he owed to the town not to allow people capable of such unprincipled conduct as he and his wife had been guilty of, to remain any longer tenants of a house of his; that they were legally only entitled to a month's notice; but that, of course, in their present trouble, he could not think of being hard upon them. They must only leave as soon as it was possible for them to do so with safety to the sick

children. And they must be prepared to pay for all measures necessary thoroughly to disinfect the house.

Having despatched this note on Saturday evening, Mr. Buller went to church on Sunday morning, in a high state of self-satisfaction over the manner in which he had discharged his duties to his fellow-creatures, and listened with much complacency to a sermon from the rector on the text, "Am I my brother's keeper?" That sermon was the subject of much discussion after the service, the congregation being agreed on only one point, namely, that Mr. Lawrence's manner had been more than usually earnest and impressive, and that he certainly "meant something." From that point onward there was wide divergence of opinion. Mrs. Playfair, smarting under the intelligence of the addition of scarlet to typhoid fever in the low districts, felt certain it was aimed directly at the corporation, with a sidelong glance at the supineness of the mayor. Mrs. Moss felt equally sure it was aimed solely at Mr. Buller, of whose delinquencies as a ground landlord she was to some extent aware. Mrs. Tatnell thought it fitted a vast number of people whom she could name exceedingly well; while Octavius Buller was himself convinced it was intended for him, in the form of an indirect commendation of the prompt and effectual steps he had taken to guard the welfare and happiness of his fellow-creatures. The rector alone walked meditatively homewards, going over again in thought the words he had spoken, and wondering whether his own conduct would stand the test of his own application of the text. Miss Tollmache was equally silent, until close to the house, when she suddenly

remarked to her father, "Mr. Lawrence meant something by that sermon. I shall ask him what it is the first time I see him."

Mr. Buller felt so much exhausted by the excitement and anxiety of the last few days, that he indulged himself in a bottle of champagne at dinner, and afterwards, smoking his cigar, with the beauties of the Wycherley park spread out before his eyes, reflected and took courage. He should certainly be rid of the Parkers, before there was a chance of any actual official investigation into the state of the drainage in their neighbourhood. He could keep the house empty for a time, and easily make it almost unapproachable, if he found it desirable to do so. Surely, in this most unexpected stroke of good fortune, there was encouragement to him to look hopefully forward, and trust that some other equally unlooked-for turn of affairs might befriend him with respect to the great object of his future aspirations.

CHAPTER VII.

GEORGE HUDDLESTONE IS BROUGHT TO THE POINT.

THERE was much perplexity in Doctor Playfair's house regarding Miss Tollmache's invitation to Rose to go and see her again. "I hope you will come and see me sometimes," Miss Tollmache had said; but in what sense were those words to be taken? Should Rose act upon them without any further communication from Wycherley Court? or were they only an intimation of Miss Tollmache's intention at some future time to ask her to visit her again? Mrs. Playfair consulted some of her friends, but no one seemed disposed to advise. The difficulty at last reached Mrs. Tatnell, who lost not a moment in putting the matter "in the right light," as she called it.

"If Mrs. Playfair chooses to allow her daughter to visit people who don't condescend to call upon herself, it is quite clear it must be done in the character of an inferior, and there can therefore be no doubt that Rose ought to wait until summoned to attend at Wycherley Court again."

Upon hearing this Mrs. Playfair shed tears, and said she never did know anything so spiteful and ill-natured as people were; that every one knew the acquaintance was not of her seeking; and that she was sure Miss Tollmache was too much of a lady to ask anyone to visit her whom she did not intend to treat as an equal. Whatever might be the nature of Kate Tollmache's claim to that much-befouled title, she was certainly very little likely to leave any one long in darkness as to her wishes respecting their personal relations to herself. Within ten days after their first meeting, the delighted Rose received a note from her, begging that if she were not engaged, she would come and lunch with her that very day, and she would drive her home in the afternoon.

In her very best hat and newest dress, Rose set out, watched with delighted eyes by her mother, and with some slight pangs of envy by her sister Alice, who, though she highly appreciated the chance of telling her school friends that Rose was gone to lunch at Wycherley Court, thought it a little hard that she should be herself excluded from a share in such honours and glories.

Mrs. Playfair derived great satisfaction from imparting the intelligence to George Huddlestone, whom she met when returning from a little shopping excursion, upon which she set out as soon as Rose was gone. She was not quite pleased with that young man, who, she began to think, showed some inclination to hang fire too long, and who, she intended, should soon be made to understand that if he did not mean anything, he must stand aside, and

give others a fair chance. She thought the idea of Rose becoming intimate at Wycherley Court likely to prove a useful stimulant, as tending to excite jealous alarm, lest he were making too certain of a prize which might yet slip from him.

George, however, made no sign. He received the news with such perfect imperturbability, that she could not help being provoked into adding,—

"Rose is really getting to be so much admired, I shall have to look out, or I shall never have her at home at all. But I suppose I must make up my mind to lose her soon. I only hope it won't be till Alice is a year or so older."

"Miss Tollmache is quite alone just now, so you are not in any immediate danger from her going there," replied the obtuse George, who saw only in these remarks a little exultant maternal vanity, and never suspected their personal aim as regarded himself. Not that he was by any means serenely self-confident. Anxious thoughts about Rose often troubled his peace of mind; but to his honest, straightforward nature, the question appeared to be solely the simple one—Did she, or did she not, love him? and it never crossed his thoughts to suppose that the society she frequented should have any bearing on that point.

Mrs. Playfair interpreted his cool rejoinder as a sort of modified defiance, and straightway resolved that Mr. George should be brought speedily to book, or removed peremptorily from the path, to make way for eligible rivals.

Rose meanwhile was enjoying herself very thoroughly, amusing Kate Tollmache not a little by

the naive unconsciousness with which she laid open before her some of the inner workings of social life in Monksford, and wondering to herself a good deal at some of the questions put to her. It really almost seemed, she thought, as if Miss Tollmache did not know as much about some things as she did herself, in which supposition, as far as the rules of society in Monksford were concerned, she was probably correct.

And then, oh! what a triumphant moment it was when, seated beside Miss Tollmache in her pony carriage, she swept through the old gateway right into the High Street, with the two beautiful spirited ponies tossing their heads, and trotting so proudly down the street. Her heart beat and her cheeks glowed, and when she saw Mrs. Tatnell staring hard at her as she turned into Colston's shop, she knew that before the next day it would be known far and wide that she had been driving with Miss Tollmache.

"You will not mind waiting for me a few moments, I hope?" Kate Tollmache said, drawing up beside the pavement. "I am under orders to get some small trifles for Fletcher, my maid, here."

Mind being seen lounging at her ease in Miss Tollmache's pony carriage at the door of a shop in the High Street? "Mind" seemed such a strange word to apply to the circumstance, that it almost gave a sarcastic tone to the question.

Miss Tollmache disappeared into the shop, and Rose sat calmly in all her glory, tasting the honied sweetness of bowing and smiling to more than one acquaintance from the vantage ground of her envied position.

She was growing quite excited with the novelty

of her situation, when she espied George Huddlestone coming slowly along the street. Why did a slight shadow fall across the brilliancy of her sunshine at the sight? She herself did not know, yet so it was. The appearance of "poor George," with his careless dress and heavy gait, seemed in some way to bring before her the fact that her present felicity was but a splendid passing dream, beyond which lay the dull realities of her everyday tame eventless colourless life.

George saw her, and came up smiling. She smiled back a kindly smile at him, yet in her secret heart she was conscious of a wish that he might go on his way before Miss Tollmache came out of the shop. It was but a passing wish, however, followed by an instantaneous pang of self-reproach, which certainly added something to the cordiality of her greeting to him.

"Well, Rose," he said, "you are cutting out all Monksford. I wondered whether you would condescend to speak to me."

"What nonsense," she replied, a little sharply, and colouring as she spoke. "But isn't it a beautiful carriage?"

"A beautiful carriage, and a splendid pair of ponies. But I should not care for you to be behind them, if I did not know that Miss Tollmache is a first-rate whip."

It was about the most pointed thing he had ever as yet said, and Rose's eyes fell in some little confusion.

"Oh," she replied, "Miss Tollmache drives beautifully."

"And you like her very much?"

"Oh, so much!"

"So much, that you begin to think great people are very charming?" he asked, looking at her the while with such loving eyes, that their expression robbed his words of all sting of sarcasm.

"No, indeed," she answered. "Of course it's all very splendid and delightful, but it isn't that makes me like Miss Tollmache. How could it? I like her because she's so kind and good-natured chiefly, and also because she's so pleasant and amusing. She's so different from any one else I know. She isn't the least stiff. She makes me feel as if I were quite at home. She's so much at her ease, and she seems to do just what she likes, and never to be afraid of doing what isn't proper."

"Yes, I know," he answered, smiling; "and I'm very glad you do like her."

"I did not know you knew her, George?"

"No more I do; that is to say, I have no personal acquaintance with Miss Tollmache; but there are some people who carry their characters written on their faces, and she is one of them. You are a lucky girl, Rose. If Miss Tollmache served behind a counter, she'd be a friend well worth any one having."

Any reply from Rose was cut short by Miss Tollmache's appearance. George Huddlestone, slightly raising his hat, stepped back and went on his way. Miss Tollmache got into the carriage, and for the next five minutes had her attention pretty well engaged in guiding her mettlesome ponies safely along the street. When at last they were in quieter quarters, she turned to Rose.

"Who was that who was speaking to you when I came out of Hammond's shop?" she asked.

"Mr. George Huddlestone, the mayor's son," Rose replied, blushing a little as she spoke, and then still more at the consciousness of having done so. "Mr. Huddlestone has the mills, and lives at The Hall. They are very rich people, and thought a great deal of in Monksford. Mr. George Huddlestone and I were playfellows when I was quite a child; and he is really very good and kind, and very much respected by every one. He is Mr. Huddlestone's only son, so he will have The Hall and all his father's fortune some day."

She was not herself aware of the fact; but her tone was distinctly apologetic as regarded "poor George." Kate Tollmache gave a quick glance at her.

"You speak as if he needed defending," she said, with a smile.

"Oh, no; indeed I didn't mean that. I only—" and she hesitated in increasing confusion. "But—well, he is careless, you know, about his dress and appearance; he never takes much trouble to make himself look well; and it makes some people think he looks common, not quite like a gentleman."

"People who admire the tailor's fashion-book style, like that," Miss Tollmache replied, with the utmost gravity and composure, pointing with her whip at two wandering stars from the neighbouring garrison town, whom they were passing at the moment, and whose glances were fixed upon the carriage with a well assumed air of supercilious scrutiny. "For my part I always look at a man's face when I want to make out what he is like, not

at his clothes; and that is a test Mr. George Huddlestone can very well stand. I have seen him in church, and wondered who he was."

"I am glad you like his looks. The Huddlestones are great friends of ours," Rose replied, feeling severely rebuked, and very thankful Miss Tollmache could not see into her mind; for she had just been admiring the two objects of the latter's sarcasm, and thinking how like Mr. Wycherley they looked. Then she thought she would hazard a question.

"Do you know Mr. Wycherley, Miss Tollmache?" she asked.

Kate answered with a merry laugh. "My dear Miss Playfair! I am afraid you are very caustic. That question following so immediately on my remarks about tailor's fashion-books, looks very like a connection of ideas. Yes, I do know him. We met last year in Vienna; and he talked to me then a good deal about the 'ruinous chateau,' as he was pleased to term it, which they possessed in England. It was his remarks brought us to look at the place, when we heard it was to be let. Do you know him?"

"I only saw him once; for a moment. Isn't he very handsome?"

"Well, perhaps. Something of the curled and scented darling, with a considerable substratum of vicious inclinations. He has the reputation of being very dissipated, and certainly plays heavily."

Rose asked no more questions. But when Miss Tollmache set her down at her own home, her pliant nature was more favourably disposed towards "poor George" than it had ever yet been. But she had

no time at the moment to think about him. There were her mother and Alice ready with a whole battery of questions which must be answered, and then it was time for tea, and Rose could not help noticing, with a sigh, that everything about the house had a very shabby, faded look, from the ill-washed table cloth, and plated teaspoons, to the well-worn carpet and dingy chair covers. Nor could she help thinking that the children were more untidy in appearance and rough in manner than usual, nor wishing that her mother would change her gown before tea, and put on a lighter and fresher-looking cap.

She escaped, as was her wont, to the garden after tea, with her book; but she did not read, she had plenty to occupy her thoughts. How nice it must be to be rich, and have everything handsome and good about you, and plenty of servants to wait upon you! Never to have to count out the linen for the wash, or help in the house when there was a stress of work. To amuse yourself all day long with books, and fancy work, and flowers; and never to be obliged to walk when it was hot and dusty, but to drive about quite cool and comfortable in a nice carriage! Then she thought about George Huddlestone, going over with renewed pleasure what Miss Tollmache had said about him, and recalled how nice things were at The Hall;—not like Wycherley Court, of course, but still everything handsome and solid, if a little sombre and old-fashioned, and plenty of money to keep everything going. Oh, how nice it must be, not to have to think so much about money, not to have to try and make all your things last as

long as possible, but to be able to buy new gloves, or new ties, and ribbons, just whenever you wanted them; and never to have to darn your stockings, or mend your underclothing! She had been up in Miss Tollmache's bedroom just before they started to drive, and Miss Tollmache had been looking for something she could not find, and had opened a number of drawers, and then gone into her dressing-room, leaving them all open, and Rose had seen "such a heap of things!"—such piles of pocket-handkerchiefs, and such rows of stockings,—such a lot of them silk too,—and such visions of lace trimmings, fine embroidery, frillings, and what not! She recalled it all as she sat in the garden, and momentarily felt more strongly how nice it must be to be rich.

Then the sound of an approaching footstep roused her from her reverie, and there was George Huddlestone coming towards her, no better dressed or more carefully brushed up than usual; but she looked more into his face, and thought how good and kind it was. And then, in some strange way, it flashed across her thoughts that people said Mr. Mostyn, at Ripley Lodge, who was such a fine handsome man, treated his wife so ill, that she had once been actually obliged to leave him. How gentle and kind George Huddlestone always was to women and children! She remembered, when she had been with him through the mills, how kindly he spoke to the women and girls, and with what bright smiles they answered him! And as it all flashed through her thoughts, she looked up at him with even a sweeter smile than that which a pang of self-reproach had purchased for him that afternoon in the High Street

and which in good truth had brought him to her side at that moment.

Very soon his tale of love was told, in simple, manly phrase. He was no adept at passionate declamation: he spoke very quietly, though his voice trembled a little. He simply told her he loved her very dearly, and that if she would trust herself to that love, no pain or sorrow should ever come near her which it was in his power to avert from her. He was not eloquent in promises. It would have seemed to him almost an insult to tell a woman you loved her, and then pile on assurances, as if it were possible that all was not included in that one single declaration. And Rose, looking into his deep, loving, honest eyes, and at his broad, calm forehead, not at his clothes and heavy walk, felt that she loved him very much, and was a very fortunate girl.

So there they sat among the whispering lilac bushes, and his arm was round her, and more than once he kissed her fair sweet face, and called her his own little rosebud. And the moon came up, but Mrs. Playfair seemed to have no dread of the dew that night. She sat smiling complacently to herself in the drawing-room, pluming herself much on her skilful tactics of the morning, and building glowing airy castles for the future, shadowed only by an occasional troubled remembrance of the terrible expense of a wedding.

Kate Tollmache, who was quite innocent of tactics, and had, perhaps in consequence, done more than anyone else to hasten the march of events that day, was also then sitting in her drawing-room, thinking of her little protégeé:—what a bright fresh un-

sophisticated little girl she was,—and thinking half-sadly,—for this same envied heiress of seven and twenty years of age was a trifle world worn, not from having tried all its pleasures and found them worthless, but from having judged them too hollow and baseless to be worth trying. Then she thought of the meeting in the High Street, and roused her father, who was dozing over his coffee cup, by suddenly asking—

"Father, do you know anything of Mr. Huddlestone, the mayor?"

"The mayor, my dear! No—yes, I do though. They were speaking of him the other night at the Jarvises', after you were gone to the drawing-room. A very superior man, I understand, not at all the ordinary tradesman, but a man who has travelled, and is really an intelligent, cultivated man. An excellent mayor also; some of them said. Why do you ask?"

"I saw his son in the town to-day. He stopped to speak to Miss Playfair, while I was in Hammond's shop. I liked his looks."

Mr. Tollmache looked a little uneasy. "My dear Kate! I hope you are not going to take a fancy to every one you meet in Monksford. We shall have the house inundated, if you don't mind. We are dangerously close to the town, remember."

Kate laughed merrily. "Poor dear! don't be alarmed. I didn't make any overtures to the young man. Indeed, he gave me no chance, for he fled at my approach, like a sparrow before a hawk. But I liked his face all the same."

And as she spoke, Kate Tollmache was thinking

that George Huddlestone would be a capital match for her little friend; never dreaming how powerfully her words that day had influenced a weak nature, and inclined it, for the moment, to form a just estimate of the relative value of genuine unpolished metal and highly burnished gilding.

The border land that night wore a somewhat different aspect in the respective houses of Huddlestone and Playfair. The doctor and his wife were full of unalloyed rejoicing. It was a grand settlement for Rose, and seemed absolutely without a "but." At The Hall there was only modified satisfaction.

"If it is to be, I'm glad its settled, for George's sake," Mrs. Huddlestone said. "Still I can't but wish things had turned out differently."

"And that George hadn't thrown himself away?" Mr. Huddlestone said, with a smile.

"Well, yes, I will say it, James; for it isn't that I'm ambitious. She is silly, there can be no doubt of that; and though she's pretty and amiable, I'm afraid she'll never be a useful wife to him. A woman needs to be something more than pretty and amiable, if she's to be a help to her husband when trials and troubles come."

She spoke with quiet confidence, for she knew right well that though she herself had brought James Huddlestone neither a pretty face nor a fortune, and had been condemned by his ambitious mother; when trouble had come upon him, he had never wanted a brave and loving heart to stand by him and cheer him on. And that was just what she felt the pretty Rose would never do for her George. She would be a bright, charming plaything in fair weather;

but when storms came, only a clinging helpless burden.

Mr. Huddlestone could not contradict his wife. He could only repeat that a man must choose for himself, and that George had chosen; and all they could do was to give his wife a daughter's place in their hearts and home.

Mr. Huddlestone paid an early visit to Doctor Playfair next morning.

"So, Playfair, our young people have made it up," he said, shaking his friend cordially by the hand. "Well, my boy has chosen a pretty, sweet, little wife; and if she'll make him a good one, I can answer for it she'll have a good husband, and a second father and mother."

"She's a very lucky girl," her father heartily responded, "and I'm sure she knows it. But I hope, Huddlestone, there's no mistake on one point. I'm a poor man with a large family; I've no money to give Rose."

"Not a word of that, my friend. George, thank God, can choose from inclination alone. He has chosen your child because he loves her; and I'll take good care such settlements are made as shall make it all straight for her. But they mustn't be in a hurry. There's no house to be had suitable for them; one must be built. They must have their own house and establishment ready before they marry. I don't like makeshifts. It'll do them no harm to wait a year or so. Both of them are young enough for that."

Doctor Playfair declared himself quite satisfied; but Mrs. Playfair was not equally well contented.

"I don't like long engagements," she said. "I'm sure they might have let the marriage take place at once, and have given them a home at The Hall until a house was ready for them. However, I suppose it must be as Mr. Huddlestone pleases,"—which, considering the liberality of his intentions, seemed a tolerably self-evident proposition.

Mrs. Huddlestone, on the contrary, was well pleased with the arrangement; as indeed she would have been with any arrangement which did not tend to hasten the marriage.

"I only hope," she said, "her mother will take care to give her some instruction in household duties. I'm afraid she is sadly ignorant of everything of that sort."

Rose Playfair's popularity did not increase in Monksford. She had gained an entrance at Wycherley Court, and now she had carried off by far the best match in the neighbourhood.

"They're downright designing people, those Playfairs," Mrs. Moss asserted. "They've been trying hard to catch George Huddlestone this long while, and I call it quite indecent the way they've hurled that girl at him incessantly,—and that pushing her in at the Court is just a piece with it all. I suppose they're going to try and set them up for county people. Well, they won't find that answer."

"I'm sure I hope she'll be happy," Mrs. Collier remarked, in so profoundly melancholy a tone, that the aspiration sounded more like a prophecy of impending woe than an invocation of bliss. "But I'm much mistaken if she has anything beyond a pretty face to recommend her; and hers is just that

sort of prettiness that fades so soon. I'll be bound, if she has any family, she'll soon look quite old and plain."

Mrs. Tatnell, in a tone as ominous as Mrs. Collier's, hoped Mr. George Huddlestone would be happy; but, for her part, she'd rather have seen a son of hers in his grave than married to such a vain, silly little flirt as that girl. Only good Miss Bradley, in her great relief at this satisfactory termination to all danger for her cousin, honestly and heartily congratulated them both, and straightway resolved to give them some handsome present when they were married, as a mark of sincere regard, she would have said; but she might more correctly have substituted, "as a thank-offering."

CHAPTER VIII.

A MOTHER'S TRIALS.

MR. TOLLMACHE'S mild remonstrance with his daughter on the subject of her acquaintances was the result of no extreme or rigidly defined exclusiveness on his part, but rather the consequence of a vague dread that Kate was a little too radical in her theories; and being one of those easy natured men, who are more apt to be shoved about by circumstances than to be their masters, he probably showed his wisdom in assuming less independence than his daughter. A pushing, vulgar-minded acquaintance would have been to him a terrible incubus, under which he would have groaned in helpless misery. Kate would have risen up and smitten down the foe with one stroke of her clear, unflinching will.

Nevertheless, within a few days after his remarks, Mr. Tollmache suddenly announced his intention of asking Mr. Huddlestone to dinner. Kate expressed no surprise. She was not unaccustomed to such vacillations. She only asked—

"How has that come about?"

"I hear such a very high character of him. They tell me he is one of the best judges of pictures in this neighbourhood, and in all respects a most agreeable companion—not at all a man one need fear knowing. I shall call this afternoon, and send down a note in the evening."

"Then you had better ask his son also," Kate suggested, thinking of her little match-making scheme, and, in her ignorance of the march of events, deciding that it would look rather too pointed to ask Rose Playfair to come the same evening.

"Very well, and then you had better write and ask the rector to join us. I understand he and Mr. Huddlestone are great friends."

The mayor accepted the invitation. He was a man as unlikely vauntingly to reject, as fawningly to seek the acquaintance of those of higher rank in life than his own. He was too wholly free from the restless egotism which prompts both courses of action, to be in the slightest danger of adopting either. He would have banqueted with a peer, or accepted a mutton chop from a poor relation, with equal readiness; and if the two claims had clashed, would simply have given the preference to the prior engagement.

Mr. Lawrence found Miss Tollmache not quite such a lively companion as usual that evening. She was much occupied during dinner in observing George Huddlestone, and in trying to draw him out. Mr. Tollmache was busy with the mayor, whom he had asked to dinner with ulterior motives, seeking for trustworthy information about a right of way

across the park, and some other points of a like nature, ending at last with more strictly personal requirements.

"I want some good pasture land, to turn out my hunters for the summer. Do you know of any to be let in the neighbourhood suitable for such a purpose?"

"I do not, but very likely Buller could arrange it for you; he does a good deal of that sort of thing. Octavius Buller—his office is in Wingate Street, just at the corner, where it joins the High Street."

Mr. Tollmache wrote down the address, and Mr. Buller's star must surely have given a little jump upwards.

Just at that moment, Kate turned to the rector.

"Are you related to a Mr. Lawrence, a barrister in London? We met him in Switzerland last summer. He was a most charming man."

"No, Miss Tollmache, I have no relations in even so moderately exalted a station of life. I am a man of the people. My father was a tradesman in a small town in Yorkshire, and was a most honest, highly respected man. I am the only one of my family who have drifted into a different sphere of life."

Was it a confession? or was it a statement of a fact? Most unmistakably the latter. There was not a trace in either look or tone of swaggering boastfulness, or of embarrassed sense of humiliation. A quick flush crossed Kate Tollmache's face, but too rapidly to be analysed. If there were the slightest change in her, it was only that her manner grew perhaps a shade more deferential.

"And how came that about?" she asked, with evident interest.

"Through the unselfish devotion of my father and mother, who thought no sacrifice too great to enable them, in their own homely phrase, to make a gentleman of their son."

"Their phrase was incorrect," she quietly replied. "They should have said, to give him the education of a gentleman. But how proud you must feel to be the son of such parents! It must have been a tremendous undertaking for them to give you the costly education which is necessary to place a man on an equal footing with the mass of our clergy. I think a man must be essentially ignoble by nature, if he is not morally benefited by merely having been the object of so much self-denying love."

"Thank you." It was all he said, but there was just the faintest tremor in his voice, and Miss Tollmache turned again to George Huddlestone, and very shortly after made her exit.

Mr. Lawrence came and sat down beside her at the tea table when he entered the drawing-room; but he said nothing until she turned and asked him,—

"What made you preach that sermon last Sunday?"

"Was there anything remarkable in my doing so?"

"Not in the fact, but in the manner. I thought you spoke as if you meant something special."

He smiled.

"You are quick at impressions, I see. You are

quite right." And then he gave her a brief sketch of the existing entanglements of Monksford life. "That poor fellow Parker," he concluded, "brought me Buller's note just as I was sitting down at the eleventh hour to prepare a sermon, and I think it gave me an inspiration. But a lot of my hearers were so much pleased with the results, that I fear they had been successfully fitting the cap on to numerous friends and acquaintances."

"Doubtless. I was able myself to present the conclusions liberally in several directions, and have felt myself a much better Christian ever since. But your social machine here seems to be in almost as general a state of dislocation as most of the kind which have come under my notice."

"That is a discovery one is bound to make whenever one gets behind the scenes. The social machinery, as you term it, of each small circle, is but a part of one gigantic whole, which must, I think, be a favourite construction of the father of lies."

"Are we all one great rampant lie, then?" Kate asked, with a merry little laugh.

"No. By no means," he replied, in the same bantering tone. "A great many of us are only wind-bags. And a wind-bag isn't a lie, you know, unless it proclaims itself a solid body. The machine, in fact, is ingeniously compounded of lies and wind-bags, with just a sufficient mingling of solidity and truth to keep it from absolutely falling to pieces."

"And how long will it manage to hold together?" she asked.

"Who can tell?" he replied. "Some day, I sup-

pose, all that is true and solid will be withdrawn, and then all the rest of the fabric will fall down with a mighty crash."

"The sooner the better. But to return to our subject. Cannot the mild persuasion of the law be brought to bear upon this man Buller?"

"Who's to pay?" was the laconic rejoinder. "We have no public prosecutor. Those personally concerned are too poor to move in such a matter; and the corporation are crippled as a body by the private interests of the various members."

"Is there not a want of energy there?" and she indicated the mayor by a slight gesture.

"No. There is only a man too honourable and upright to make use of the only weapons whereby he might achieve his ends. Honest men are not always the most successful correctors of abuses in this world."

"Then bring public opinion to bear. Call an indignation meeting."

"I sometimes think it will come to that; but the time is not ripe. And it may be that ere it is, private malice may do what all appeals to common justice and humanity have failed to accomplish. It is in some measure unfortunate that Buller's persecution of these poor people has occurred at this particular moment. A very small matter is sufficient to divert people's attention. And at present, they are all so busy chattering about George Huddlestone's intended marriage, that they forget to become indignant on the score of justice and humanity. Otherwise the high moral tone implied by unsparing censure of other men's sins, would

probably induce a good many people to talk a great deal against Buller. And it is possible some beneficial results might be secured."

"Is Mr. George Huddlestone going to be married soon, then?"

"I don't know how soon. He is just engaged to Miss Playfair."

"What, my pretty little friend? Delightful! Mr. Lawrence," she added, with a merry, mischievous look, which wonderfully lighted up her face, "I have no more time or thought to bestow upon such commonplace topics as justice and humanity. I must go and talk to Mr. George Huddlestone. Please join the mayor and my father."

She left him as she spoke. He smiled quietly at her words; but he did not follow her suggestion. He sat silent where he was, abstractedly twisting his beard round his fingers, with a tranquil, well-satisfied expression on his face, and not appearing much concerned with the conversation of the others.

Kate Tollmache gave an emphatic approval to the projected marriage in her private dressing-room musings that night, remembering only with some slight misgivings Rose's apologetic manner of speaking of George Huddlestone. But in spite of her own declarations, the rector and his communications occupied a much larger share of her thoughts than did love and matrimony.

Miss Bradley was always on the alert, whenever her cousin dined out, to ply him with questions on his return home, a practice which, it must be confessed, she pursued with laudable perseverance under much discouragement, for the information

thereby secured was in general extremely meagre. But, on this occasion, she was more than usually successful, and retired to bed, at length, the happy possessor of various highly interesting pieces of knowledge, for repetition to all her acquaintances.

"I'm sure," she told Mrs. Tatnell, the following day, "it is quite a boon to the rector that Mr. Tollmache has come to Wycherley Court. He must be a most delightful man. Lionel does seem to enjoy going there so much. He was quite in spirits when he came home. He told me all about the evening so pleasantly, and what Mr. Tollmache had talked about. Such a well-informed man he must be; and Lionel, you know, is generally so silent. But I can't think, can you, that Miss Tollmache would look well with crimson and pale yellow roses in her hair? I can't say I like those violent contrasts."

Mrs. Tatnell fully agreed with her friend on the subject of Miss Tollmache's taste and the rector's advantages; and proceeded forthwith to lay the whole matter before the three Misses Witham, affirming it as her opinion, that since the rector was not a man of family himself, it would be more to his credit if he did not appear quite so anxious to be on intimate terms with people of rank, who of course were only civil to him on account of his professional position. "And then to be so specially agreeable to them also. Very like fawning, it seems to me, and that's a thing I can't endure. As my poor, dear husband used to say—'If there's one thing more contemptible than another, it's to see a man cringing to people of higher rank than himself.'"

"I think Mr. Lawrence a man quite qualified for society of any rank," Miss Witham replied, a trifle superbly. She had a cousin who was an admiral, and a relation who lived in Bryanston Square, and with whom she occasionally spent a week; so she felt herself qualified to be oracular on the subject of society in Monksford. The assumption, however, in this particular instance, brought her a venom-tipped shaft in reply.

"Well," retorted Mrs. Tatnell, with a slight toss of her head,—"it's to be hoped they think the same at the Court, for people do say Mr. Lawrence is trying for Miss Tollmache. I should have thought such a thing impossible; but, if it's as you say, he may perhaps have a chance. I'm sure, poor man, I should think a wife would be a great boon to him, so persecuted as he is. Quite disgusting, I think, to see it."

This remark raised the colour of all three Misses Withams; so Mrs. Tatnell was able to depart in such charity with her neighbours, as might result from the assurance that she had had the best of it.

Those were very happy days to Rose Playfair. The dull routine of everyday life in a house where a large family had to be brought up on very limited means, and where there was, consequently, a very narrow margin beyond the actual necessaries of life, was exchanged for a far brighter hued existence. It is true there was no question of an immediate marriage,—therefore no delightful considerations about trousseau, wedding-dress, bridesmaids; no pouring in of presents, and no charming manifesta-

tions of being the heroine of the hour. But still there was a great and fascinating change in all her circumstances. The dignity of being engaged exalted her perceptibly above her less highly favoured friends and companions, to say nothing of the worldly prosperity which that engagement promised to her. Then George had given her beautiful presents,—a ring, which was the envy of all her youthful acquaintances; a brooch and ear-rings, far beyond her wildest flights of ambition; to say nothing of various other costly trifles. Also he had put splendid visions before her for the future. He had insisted on giving her a riding habit, and was looking out for a suitable horse, that she might ride with him sometimes; and he had promised that when they were married, she should have a pony carriage all for herself, and that he would teach her to drive. Yes, she was a most fortunate girl, and George was a dear good fellow, and she did really love him very much. And then she would fall to wondering whether she could not persuade him to have his hair cut before next Sunday, and not to wear those very old-fashioned collars any more.

It almost seemed derogatory to her dignity, when her mother rudely dispersed some enchanting day dream of future splendour by a request that she would darn some socks for the boys, or alter little Edith's Sunday frock; and sometimes, it must be admitted, she complied with some petulance. But she was an amiable little girl, and on the whole carried her honours better than nine out of ten girls in her circumstances would have done, fulfilling her home duties with moderate alacrity, and always

ready to greet George with a sweet smile. His proceedings cost his mother an occasional sigh.

"I don't like it, James. It's natural enough a man should think a deal of the girl who's to be his wife, and always want to please her, and quite right too. But it does seem to me as if there was a sort of nervous feeling about George that he must always be making presents to her, and promising her things, just as if he felt it was the only way in which he could make sure of holding her. Why, they've not been engaged three weeks yet, and I'm sure he's given her more presents already, than ever I had from you in all the fourteen months we were engaged."

"Perhaps I was remiss on that point."

"No, you were not. But you knew they weren't needed; and that's just what I'd give a deal to feel sure was the case with George. I'd be quite reconciled to the marriage, for all she isn't very wise, if I felt quite certain she loved George as he deserves to be loved, for himself, and didn't think more about the fine house, and fine clothes, and carriage she'll get, than about the good husband she'll have."

"She's but young, my love; we must hope to see her improve. They're not well off, and of course she hasn't been used to such things. It's but natural at her age her head should be a little turned at the thought of the change. But when she's accustomed to them, I daresay she'll settle down, and think more of her real blessings."

By which speech it appeared that Mr. Huddlestone was disposed to make the best of circumstances. In good truth, he was little better satisfied than his

wife; but he did not care to admit the fact; and he had the faculty, far commoner with men than with women, of accepting the inevitable, how undesirable soever it might be, without useless fretting and chafing.

More important to George Huddlestone than he might have quite liked, had he been aware of the fact, were Kate Tollmache's congratulations to Rose Playfair on her engagement.

"You treated me very badly," she said; "for you let me make remarks on Mr. George Huddlestone, without warning me that you were engaged to him."

"Oh! but I wasn't engaged then. George spoke to me that very day, in the evening, after you left me at home."

"Well, at any rate, I am glad my observations were not uncomplimentary. I think," she added with a smile, "I was disposed to be more complimentary than you were."

Rose looked slightly guilty. "I can't help wishing, sometimes, George would dress better, and that he had a better figure. He does look rather common, when one contrasts him with—with—"

"Tailor's fashion books! My dear Rose," she added, very earnestly, "I have seen a great deal more of the world than you have, and of course I know that a handsome exterior often catches a girl's fancy. But it is a very untrustworthy test of the real man. A man who thinks a great deal about his dress and appearance before marriage, is very likely to think a good deal more about them afterwards than about his wife's happiness and

comfort. Believe me, you have drawn a prize in the matrimonial lottery. Don't undervalue your good fortune."

"Oh, no. Indeed I do not. I know I am most fortunate, and George is the dearest and best fellow in the world. I know he will be very good to me, and I shall do all I can to make him happy."

Nevertheless, though she always felt, after she had been with Miss Tollmache, as if she appreciated George more highly, she still wished that he had more of the appearance which would have made her feel proud of showing him off as her future husband. And Kate Tollmache began sometimes to reflect, with a little feeling of satisfaction, that her match-making ideas had been ideas alone. "She is a silly little girl," she said to herself, "and has no just appreciation of her good fortune. What can have attracted him so powerfully towards her?"

The Tollmaches had been weighed in the county balance, and found wanting. Wanting, that is to say, in all that makes weight in those special scales. Mr. Tollmache was good for a handsome subscription to the county pack, for both he and his daughter were fond of hunting; but that was about the beginning, middle, and end of their recommendations. He hated politics, and made no secret of the fact. A feeble, lukewarm support in an election contest, was all which could ever be counted upon from him. Where was the use of being a younger son, he said, if you did not keep yourself clear of all that sort of turmoil? Neither was he to be cajoled into making himself of use in the county to any important extent, magisterially or otherwise. He

might be induced occasionally to take the chair at a meeting—he had indeed promised Mr. Lawrence that he would do so, if an indignation meeting on the drainage question was summoned. But beyond that, with all his easy good nature, he was a most impracticable man. He hated trouble, and had a handsome fortune; therefore he would not be troubled.

The counts against Kate Tollmache were even more serious. Mr. Tollmache was only a negative evil, she was unquestionably a positive one. She was an heiress, therefore a dangerous rock ahead to all less highly favoured damsels in the neighbourhood, who were quite shrewd enough to know that her general want of favour with men was no safeguard on that point. They might not much appreciate her personally, but they would nevertheless be careful not to commit themselves with less largely dowered aspirants, until they were quite satisfied there was nothing to be hoped from her. And, even failing actual hopes, the constant contemplation of a very big fish, made all the little fishes seem smaller by contrast. She was the gall and wormwood of the Jarvises' existence. Miss Jarvis professed ardent devotion to music, and song. Kate made no professions, but sang a great deal better, and had a far finer voice. Clarissa Jarvis, the beauty, felt bound of course to show her charms in the hunting field, and was at heart horribly frightened on horseback; so she rode a reedy thorough bred, and had a habit of dashing gallantly at stiff fences, and always being compelled, by some unforeseen accident, to pull up before the fatal moment. Kate Tollmache had a

much better seat, and stopped at nothing. Not being in the least aware of her rival's propensities, she in all honesty exclaimed one day, when she saw her going straight at an awkward ditch,—"For heaven's sake, Miss Jarvis, don't try it; your horse isn't up to it!" And Miss Jarvis heard a low derisive laugh hard by, from an old member of the hunt, and hated Kate Tollmache right heartily. With Lady Jarvis, her cup of iniquity soon overflowed, in spite of her curt rebuff to Colonel Twyford, as it shortly appeared that he was so enraged at the slight put upon him, that all his energies were concentrated upon a perfectly fruitless attempt to pique her into a more fitting frame of mind; which absorption of his faculties was most detrimental to more judiciously disposed young women.

Finally, although almost open house was kept at Wycherley Court, and visitors came and went with a frequency which kept Monksford perpetually on the stretch, the Tollmaches were held "not to entertain much." There were no festivities on a large scale,—no balls, no great garden parties; so altogether they appeared to be most undesirable people. Lady Jarvis felt herself called upon to take the state of matters into serious consideration. Her eldest daughter was eight-and-twenty years of age, Clarissa, the pale-eyed beauty, was only two years younger, and "would not last," the mother said to herself, in cruelly candid phraseology,—meaning that her beauty was of a type which would soon fade. For ten years Ada had sung, for eight years Clarissa had hunted; and neither had, as yet, succeeded in either singing or hunting herself into

the most remote prospect of an eligible settlement. What was to be done? The poor woman almost hated her daughters sometimes, as she saw them toiling on at their fruitless labour, and she would probably have felt relieved if one or both would have turned Roman Catholic, and gone into a convent. Strive on, however, she must, and it was clearly time for some special effort and a specially fitting time for some such effort was at hand.

The race week was drawing near. With the races came the county ball, and it was a period of mild excitement to the Olympians, of furious dissipation to the town's people. All the country houses round were wont to be filled with visitors. The great ones relaxed somewhat, and were gracious to the inferior creation. They jostled one another amicably on the race course and in the grand stand; and at the ball, slender, silken robed goddesses condescended to touch with the finger tips of their dainty gloves the hands of country bumpkins in quadrilles,—while the feminine bumpkins, whatever their proper designation may be, occasionally found themselves enjoying the exquisite felicity of a waltz, encircled by even a titled arm.

On this occasion, the coming prospects were unusually splendid. A foreign prince—a genuine prince, not a princelet—was making a tour through England, with a view to studying the manners and customs of the natives, and he was to spend the race week at the Duke of Bermondsey's, the great man of the whole county. He was to be at the races and the ball, and there were to be sundry entertainments at Wyvern Abbey to do him honour. Under

these circumstances, the country houses could hold out unusual lures, and were all busy making up their respective parties,—Mrs. Pendennis throwing out feelers far and wide in pursuit of heiresses, Lady Jarvis equally ardent in the search for heirs.

She determined to spare no pains, and she calculated carefully the amount of accommodation that Eaglescliff could be made to afford. She sternly denied her son and his wife a shelter for the time. They were useless, and worse, for Mrs. Jarvis was young and very pretty. No such visitors were wanted at Eaglescliff. She ruthlessly pronounced sentence of banishment against her two younger daughters, who were to be sent to spend the time cheerfully with an infirm great aunt at a dull sea-side place. Amy and Stella appealed with tears to their father, and Sir Myles ventured on a remonstrance.

"It is really very hard upon the poor girls, to send them away just when there is a little gaiety going on."

"I am not going to drag four daughters about with me," responded Lady Jarvis bitterly. "I am sorry for the girls, but I cannot help it. Besides, there is no denying that Ada is beginning to look a little faded. If one has four daughters out, everyone knows the eldest must be getting on; and Amy and Stella look so much fresher, they make Ada appear even older by contrast."

Sir Myles was silenced, and Lady Jarvis was inexorable. She was not hard-hearted. She would have been a kind and indulgent mother if she could; but what could she do? So she steeled herself resolutely against softer feelings, by turning her attention

steadily towards the waning charms of Ada and Clarissa, and sent forth her invitations, amongst which was one to Mr. Wycherley, impressing upon him the importance of his making acquaintance with the country to which he by birth belonged, and the neighbourhood which she fondly hoped would one day be his home; and begging him to come and pay a long visit at Eaglescliff, and enjoy all the approaching festivities. He was not a very great prize, but he was worth something; and when there are many hungry mouths to be fed, and not much to put into them, small morsels become objects of importance.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. MOSS BECOMES PUBLIC SPIRITED.

HOW sharp are the thorns which lurk hidden amongst even Olympian roses! It is not too much to say that those approaching festivities, towards which so many thoughts were turned, were a source of unalloyed anticipations of delight to only a few young hearts newly released from the schoolroom. Paternal souls were gloomy and depressed at the amount of outlay positively stated to be unavoidable if an appearance was to be maintained befitting the family position in the county. Maternal hearts were fretted and worried at the difficulty of obtaining the necessary sanction in the matter of milliner's bills, and requisites of a like nature; while the younger members of the community had a hundred dreads, or jealousies, or heartburnings, stabbing them on all sides. Yet all were wreathed in smiles, and all declared it was going to be the most charming autumn ever known in the county.

In Monksford, as yet, the prospect attracted but little notice. Not that but when the time drew

nearer, the social cauldron there would seethe and bubble with even more show of violent working than in the higher regions; but there were not the same extensive preparations to be made. Therefore the excitement did not begin until nearer the time of action. Costumes for the races and ball, and perhaps a luncheon or dinner to be provided, were matters requiring thought and arrangement certainly. But what were they, compared to the settlement of toilets for half-a-dozen different entertainments, graced by the presence of royalty, and at all of which the same people would be met? and to preparations for receiving and entertaining, for perhaps a week or ten days, guests with extensive requirements, and guests' servants with far more magnificent expectations than those of their employers? Well might the hapless Olympians sigh, and think how little "those town's-people" knew of the burden of greatness.

There were aspirations, however, in Monksford, and aspirations which, at that moment, were causing many heads, either absolutely or by implication, to lie uneasily. The value of many things in this world is cumulative, depending far more upon the amount of effort necessary to obtain them, or to prevent some one else obtaining them, than on their own intrinsic value. There are many Naboth's vineyards, the principal attraction of which consists in the gratification enjoyed in wrenching them away from some one else.

When, at the last Easter election of churchwardens, Mr. Daniels, the parish churchwarden, had somewhat reluctantly consented to be re-elected

on condition only that he should not be called upon to serve beyond the following Easter, Mr. Moss moved, as has been told, by a slight mortifying memory of past failure, had resolved that he would stand again for the office, to which he had little doubt he should now be unanimously elected. It was, however, in the first instance, really little more than a languid idea which possessed his mind, the office not being one altogether without inconveniences for a business man. Mr. Octavius Buller had also given a somewhat careless consideration to the thought that it might be advantageous to him, in some respects, to occupy the position. At that moment, however, had any third candidate, equally indifferent to both, come forward and declared it his intention to canvass vigorously for votes, neither would probably have thought the election worth the trouble of a struggle. Both men had, however, admitted, in almost identical phrase, to their respective partners, the thoughts which had occurred to them. "I've a mind to stand for the post again myself," said Moss to Mrs. Moss. "I've a good mind to take the office," said Buller to his wife. Fatal admissions! Through the mild confidences of feminine social intercourse, these conjugal intimations soon drifted into the keeping of bosom friends,—each man learned his neighbour's design; and Moss's languid idea became a firm intention, Buller's careless thought a steady resolution. Then began a system of secret underground working, the tactics of each man being invariably speedily made known to the other, and intention and resolution rapidly developed into vicious determination, Moss

declaring that he did not care so very particularly about being churchwarden, but that he was not going to be done out of the post by that scoundrel Buller; and Buller affirming that he was not particularly anxious about the election, he was only determined he would move heaven and earth, before that sneaking rascal Moss should carry it over his head.

Matters were in this train at the time of the conference at the mayor's house on the drainage question; and it was indeed a hard case for those luckless wights who were entangled with both of the conflicting parties, and could not take a single step without hearing the clanking of their chains. True to his promise, to keep the matter before the council, Mr. Huddlestone brought it forward at their next meeting, which took place just about the time of Mr. Buller's public spirited conduct regarding Mrs. Parker, the laundress. The meeting was a fully attended one, as of course the eloquent discourse of Mrs. Tatnell, Miss Witham, and others, had let all the members of the corporation know pretty well what was in the wind. Moss and Buller were both there, burning against one another with an animosity which even the necessity of combining strongly against sanitary reform, was hardly sufficient to keep in check; each man having been, of course, informed how the other had called him "scoundrel," or "sneaking rascal."

The mayor stated the case with clearness and firmness; reminding the corporation that their attention had been more than once called to this matter, and moving that the council should at once resolve to take active steps, with a view to

remedying the present unsatisfactory state of the drainage of the town. His speech was followed by the usual result. Buller and Moss were both ready with their oft-used arguments against any steps being taken in the matter, and the rest of the council followed suit. But on this occasion the mayor had a stronger argument in the back ground.

"Very, well, gentlemen," he said; "if you refuse to take any measures, you must be prepared to stand by the consequences. An influential person in the neighbourhood is prepared, if nothing be done, to bring public opinion to bear upon the point. I warn you, that if you persist in your refusal to examine into this matter, a full report of the state of the case will be published in the papers, and then an indignation meeting will be held in the town."

This was not by any means the manner in which the corporation had intended that philanthropy should undertake its duties for it; and one of Mr. Buller's satellites proceeded to pour forth an angry invective against the iniquitous persecution thus threatened against that conscientious and public-spirited body, the corporation of Monksford. But Mr. Huddlestone curtly cut him short.

"My good fellow, it's no use grumbling here. You may be very sure no one here has any intention of promoting such a movement. The thing for you to consider is whether, under the circumstances, it would not be well for the council to move actively in the matter."

This proposition, after a few more violent philippics against an injurious public, was carried, leaving it only to be settled what action on the part of the

corporation would be sufficient to silence its evil-minded persecutors, without pledging it definitely to anything; and a course of action was not far to seek. What could be more proper, Mr. Moss suggested, as a preliminary step, than that the health officer should be desired to examine into the matter, and lay a report before the council at their next meeting?

This suggestion was most cordially received, the motion was carried unanimously, and the council broke up, with the satisfaction of feeling that they had at least postponed the evil hour of seriously undertaking their just liabilities.

On his homeward way, Mr. Octavius Buller looked in upon Mr. Smithson, and condescendingly informed him of the course resolved upon.

"Of course the clerk will give you due notice of the resolution. I merely just called to mention it, in a friendly manner."

"Thank you. Very kind of you, Mr. Buller, I'm sure," replied the unhappy Smithson, enduring mental thumb-screws, all the same. Right well he knew what he must say of Buller's houses, if he made a faithful report—and—he owed Buller money.

"Of course, it does not take you long to draw up such a report," Buller put in, carelessly.

"Oh dear, no. In such a simple case, a very short time is sufficient."

"Ah! then I think, were I in your place, I would let the matter rest for a time. It would be a pity to disturb some of the people who are still suffering. You will have ample notice when the next meeting will be held. I think I would leave things alone until nearer that time."

"Certainly, Mr. Buller. That will be much the better course." And poor Smithson thought he saw a gleam of light upon his darkness. Buller clearly meant to do something at once.

"Unquestionably. The people are a little excited just now. Under those circumstances, it is extremely hard to secure information which may be depended upon. I am sure you must have observed how much the lower classes exaggerate when they are the least excited."

"Undoubtedly—most true."

Mr. Octavius Buller went home, feeling that he had managed his affairs with much skill and forethought. He would he able to get rid of the Parkers before Smithson would move in the matter, and easily destroy the most damaging evidence which could be brought against him. And dismissing the matter from his thoughts for the moment, he set himself to consider what would be his best chance of introducing himself to Mr. Tollmache, with a view to securing his vote for the churchwardenship.

But his self gratulations were somewhat premature. He had to deal with human beings, not with puppets; and they would not always dance exactly according to the manner in which he worked the strings. At the very moment of his self-satisfied reflections, Mr. Moss, seated in a comfortable armchair in his drawing-room, was looking up from his paper to listen furtively, his attention having been attracted by some fragments of small talk passing between Mrs. Moss and her daughter, as they sat working by the window.

The name of Buller occurring in some remark,

from his daughter, was the first thing that caught his ear; and glancing round, he saw her bending slightly forward, to look out into the street.

"Yes, indeed," replied Mrs. Moss. "It's downright disgraceful. She's a poor faded enough looking creature at any time, without his making her go about dressed as if she were a servant. He's a mean, stingy wretch. It's my belief he'd tear the coat off his own father's back, if he could sell it for half-a-crown: and never a child to leave a penny to. It's just downright miserly love of money, for money's sake."

"He's always well enough dressed himself," Miss Moss chimed in.

"Oh, yes, of course. That's, as you may say, an investment. He'd be less thought of in business, if he looked mean and shabby. But I wonder if ever he thinks there's such a thing as vengeance in this world? I'd be afraid to lie down in my bed at night, if I'd that man's conscience. Miss Witham has been here to-day, and the way he's persecuting those poor Parkers is enough to bring a judgment on his head straight off. She has been to see them. She has had fever, and isn't afraid. She says it's trust in Providence; but I don't think, somehow, she'd go, if she hadn't had fever. I never heard of her going where there was smallpox, and I suppose Providence can protect people from smallpox just as well as from scarlet fever! However, she has been to the Parkers, and she says the state of the house is awful; and by all Mrs. Parker told her, it's a marvel they haven't fever in every house in the street."

"What's that about Buller and the Parkers?" asked Mr. Moss. He had heard something of a

laundress named Parker, about whom there had been a row, because she had been taking in linen to wash with fever in the house; but being very certain that no linen from his house had ever gone thither, he had not troubled himself further about the matter.

"It's about that Mrs. Parker, the laundress, who has got scarlet fever in the house. They're Buller's tenants, it seems; and she has been telling Miss Witham the trouble they're in. Poor soul! it does seem hard. She says the drains are in an awful state, and have been for long, and that she has been at Buller about it times without end, and warning him there'd be fever or something break out; and never a thing would he do. Then the moment he hears they've got the fever, he's down upon her like a tiger for taking in the linen still; and he has been all over the place, warning every one against her; and now he has been and given them notice to quit as soon as ever the children can be moved—and it's like enough they'll be moved in their coffins, poor little things! One was buried yesterday, and there's another they don't think 'll live. Of course she was very wrong to go on with her washing; but it's a sad case, poor soul! They've nothing else to depend on. Her husband has never been fit for work, save very light jobs, since he got hurt in Buller's cellar; and now there's all this illness in the house, and her whole livelihood gone. I gave Miss Witham five shillings for her."

"Quite right, my dear. I'll send Miss Witham a packet of goods for her to-morrow. But where do they live?"

"In River Row."

"River Row? I didn't know these were Buller's houses!"

"A good many are. And she gives an awful account of the drainage in all of them. She says the smells are quite sickening sometimes, especially when a little rain comes, just after dry weather. Then it's enough to poison anyone. Her children are always ailing with sore throat or something."

"She needn't so much regret being turned out, then."

"But where are they to go? There isn't a place to be had. And they've been at some expense to fit up that place for laundry work. I'm sure it's a crying sin. Here's that Buller coming down upon her so sharp about continuing to take in the linen, and all the while he's endangering the whole town by letting that place continue just a regular breeding place for fevers and everything of the kind. A nice sort of man to want to get made churchwarden indeed! I should say the less the church has to do with him the better! Look, Maria; there go George Huddlestone and Rose Playfair. Did you ever see a girl so tricked out? I suppose he's beginning to pay for her things already. Well, if that young man hasn't made a mess of it, I never saw one who had."

The conversation becoming thus uninteresting to Mr. Moss, he took up the paper once more, but he did not read. Once and again his eyes ran over a few lines; but then they wandered away, and he gazed abstractedly out of the window. Food for much reflection had been presented to his active mind, and he did reflect. Finally, taking out his

pocket-book, he looked to see if any date had been fixed for the next meeting of the council; and then made various notes, with an air of deep abstraction.

The following morning, he called betimes on the unfortunate Mr. Smithson, whose heart sank when he saw him enter, with a heavy foreboding of further trouble impending.

"Have you received notice of the resolution of the council yesterday, Mr. Smithson?" Moss asked.

"Not formal notice as yet. But I heard accidentally, yesterday, from one of the council, what had passed."

"Ah, well; you will have the formal notice, no doubt, in the course of the day. I merely thought I would suggest to you the desirability of proceeding in the matter at once without any loss of time."

"Well—I—I'm rather busy just now. I don't think there is any need for very immediate action. The council will not meet again for some little time. The drains won't run away meanwhile," and the unhappy Smithson strove to distort his countenance into the semblance of a smile at his little, feeble attempt at a joke.

"Excuse me, Mr. Smithson," replied Mr. Moss, with much gravity; "I differ from you entirely. I consider that instant and searching attention to this matter is absolutely required. I have the strongest reasons for believing that the drainage in some of the houses in that district, especially in River Row, is in a most shocking state. This matter should be thoroughly investigated. The funds of the corporation must not be spent in improvements, and then the cupidity or negligence of ground landlords be

allowed to frustrate all benefit from such expenditure."

"Certainly not, Mr. Moss. But still, as I said, the drains will not run away. The state of things will be just the same a few weeks hence as at the present moment."

"Pardon me, I cannot agree with you. The weather has been dry and hot for some time; the glass is falling, and there is every sign of some coming change. I believe I am right in opining that a defective state of drainage is most perceptible when the first rain falls after a tract of dry weather?"

"Yes, certainly," Mr. Smithson was forced to admit.

"Then there can be no doubt, I think, that the present moment is the most fitting time for some examination. I sincerely trust, Mr. Smithson, you will be able to see your way to take instant steps in this matter. I am sorry if so doing should in any way inconvenience you; but, as a member of the town council, I feel it to be my duty to watch carefully over the interests of the ratepayers."

"I understood you had opposed all action in the matter at the meeting yesterday," the unhappy Smithson was goaded into remarking. "You seem to have changed your mind very suddenly, Mr. Moss."

"I can but act as every other honest man must act, Mr. Smithson, on the information he possesses. I was not yesterday in possession of a great deal of information which I have since obtained. I wish you good morning. I must leave the matter to you now. Of course, I merely express my opinion to you. I do

not venture as a private individual to dictate. By-the-bye, I heard that you intended applying to the council for an increase of salary."

"I—I—had thought of it," stammered Mr. Smithson. "The salary is very low."

"Ah, well—of course it will be a matter for consideration," and Mr. Moss went his way. He had much work before him that day, and in the discharge of his duties towards his fellow creatures, enjoying Miss Witham's trust in Providence, and consciousness of having had scarlet fever, he did not shrink from risks which his public-spirited fellow townsman Buller had not dared to face. He plunged boldly into River Row. He even invaded the house of Mrs. Parker; unlocked the floodgates of her gratitude and eloquence with a handsome present of groceries and some kindly expressions of sympathy with her in her great trouble, which were genuine enough, —for he was not a hard-hearted man under such circumstances,—and was soon in possession of all she could tell him with regard to his rival's general management of his affairs,—and that was not a little. He visited other houses as well—in fact, he spent some hours in that infected district,—then returned to his house, had a warm bath, put on fresh clothes, ordered those he had worn to be spread out in the sun in the back yard, on the plea that he had found some traces of moth upon them, and then joined his family, satisfied that he had faithfully reconciled the duties of a public man with those of a husband and father!

He did not tell Mrs. Moss where he had been; but he told her all he had learned, closing his account

by bringing his clenched fist down upon the table with a bang, and exclaiming,—

"By heaven! the fellow ought to be kicked out of the town, if not tried for manslaughter. I should feel myself for ever culpable did I not strain every nerve to prevent the rascal securing the churchwardenship."

"My gracious, Sam!" exclaimed Mrs. Moss; "and there he is at this very moment coming through the Court gateway. I'll be bound, he's been and fished up some pretence to call on Mr. Tollmache, that he may get round him and secure his vote. They say Mr. Tollmache is such an easy-going sort of man, I daresay he'll promise it without ever looking into the matter at all."

"The sneaking scoundrel! I'll call on Mr. Tollmache myself without delay."

"For mercy's sake, take care what you do! Buller's just the man to have the law of you, if you give him a chance."

"I'll run any risk," replied the magnanimous Mr. Moss, "before our town shall be disgraced by having that fellow as churchwarden."

All that day, and through the long hours of a sleepless night, did the cruelly-goaded Mr. Smithson reflect upon his unhappy position. The debt, which had been a millstone of yore, seemed now to have suddenly grown into a huge mountain, crushing him remorselessly beneath its overwhelming weight. He saw no escape from the hateful position in which it placed him. If he faithfully discharged the duties of his official post, he knew very well what revelations he must make to the town council; and there

was Buller ready to crush him unhesitatingly. If, on the other hand, he sacrified his character for rectitude, and averted that danger by "cooking" his report, there was Moss ready to expose him pitilessly. There was but one way of escape from the dilemma, and that way one which only momentarily averted the peril in which he stood. He might at once resign his appointment; but then he sacrificed the salary, and though it was but small, its loss would make a terrible gap in so slender an income as was his, and place him ultimately more entirely in his dreaded creditor's power. Nevertheless, it seemed to be the only step open to him; and when he rose in the morning, feverish and haggard, he had resolved upon taking it without further delay.

The thought of how much his motives for such sudden and unexpected action would be canvassed and misrepresented in Monksford, where no action of any one was too trivial for keen and animated discussion, added a fresh sting to his sufferings; and over his untasted breakfast it suddenly occurred to him, that it was in his power to defend himself on that point in some measure. He knew the mayor personally very slightly, but he knew him very well by repute; and he forthwith resolved to call upon him and privately confide to him the whole state of his hard case, and the necessity thus forced upon him. He found him at home, in the drawing-room with Mrs. Huddlestone, and straightway begged the favour of a private interview. Mr. Huddlestone led the way to his private room at once; and with that kindly air of being quite ready to give full attention

to whatever matter may be in hand, which goes far towards reassuring an anxious visitor, drew forward a chair for him, and seated himself opposite to him.

"You look very pale and anxious, Smithson. I hope there is nothing wrong?"

Poor Mr. Smithson had thought it would be very hard to tell his tale; but the difficulty seemed to be melting rapidly away, as he looked at the grave, kind face, turned with such evident interest towards him, and heard the sympathising tones of the mayor's voice. He felt intuitively that here was a man whose first thought, even were it a tale of sin and crime which was laid bare before him, would be not how far are you guilty? but how can I possibly aid you?

It was no tale of crime he had to tell. He merely stated the case clearly and distinctly, explained his unfortunate position with regard to Buller, mentioned the two visits he had received, and the subsequent necessity forced upon him for resigning his post.

"Your resolution is very creditable to you, Mr. Smithson," said the mayor.

"No, Mr. Huddlestone, I cannot let you give me that credit; I am in a cleft stick. I don't know whether I should have been so honest had any other course been open to me."

"You will let me then commend the honesty of your avowal, and assure you of my sincere sympathy. And will you allow me to ask you a few questions of a more personal nature? Believe me, I do not do so from idle curiosity, only from a wish to aid you if I possibly can."

"You are very kind."

"May I ask what is the amount of your debt to Buller?"

Mr. Smithson named it.

"And you find yourself quite unable to discharge it?"

"Quite unable."

"I am sorry to hear so poor an account of your professional income."

"There is not practice sufficient here, of a lucrative nature, for two men. Crawley and Prescott have been so long established at Willesbury that they carry off all the county practice, and some of the best in Monksford also. I was induced to settle here on false representations, and now cannot afford to move. I am therefore obliged to make the best of it, and struggle on as I can."

"But in the present case. Supposing you were free from this obligation to Buller, you would be in a position to act independently?"

"Certainly."

"Then, Mr. Smithson, I would ask you to take no further step until you hear again from me. I am not without hope that this matter may yet be adjusted without the necessity for your resigning your post. It would be a loss to you, and the change disadvantageous to us, at this moment. You shall hear from me to-morrow, at the latest."

Mr. Smithson took his leave with a far lighter heart than he had carried about with him for a long while. He could not see what reasonable hope Mr. Huddlestone could have of accommodating the business in hand; but there was a moral atmosphere of truth and sincerity about the man, which made an

expression of a hope on his part more encouraging than a declaration of certainty on the part of many another man.

The mayor sat for some time after Mr. Smithson's departure, sunk in what Doctor Playfair would perhaps have termed Machiavellian reflection; and over their wine that evening, he remarked to his son,—

"Buller has over-reached himself at last, and will, I hope, be the cause of our getting something done to remedy the disgraceful state of the drainage."

"How has he managed that? I thought he was too cautious for any such luck."

"His persecution of those unfortunate Parkers has caused a great chatter, and brought to light some facts respecting the state of his houses. Moss has got upon the scent, and will, I believe, now urge on the drainage question, in his eagerness to make as public as possible all facts calculated to damage Buller in public estimation, and thereby diminish his chances of securing the churchwardenship. Smithson's report must necessarily be most injurious to Buller."

"I fancied he owed Buller money, and therefore could not act freely."

"I think that matter may be arranged," his father replied, as he rose to leave the room.

The following morning Mr. Smithson received a note from the mayor. Enclosed were bank notes for the amount of his debt.

"You must in no way regard this as a benefaction," the mayor wrote. "Your full and candid report on this question will probably bring about

a result which I have had much at heart for some years. No new hand could do half so much as you can at this moment. My benefaction is to the whole town, especially the poorer part of it, rather than to yourself; though, at the same time, it is an additional pleasure to me to feel that in accomplishing one object I have served another, and been able to aid you to escape from a position most distressing to an honourable man. Under the circumstances, I prefer sending bank notes rather than a cheque."

An hour afterwards, Mr. Smithson abruptly entered Mr. Huddlestone's private room at the mills. His face was very pale, and worked a good deal. He strode across the room, and before Mr. Huddlestone had time to rise from his desk, grasped his hand, wrung it in a manner which caused a sudden spasm to contract the mayor's face, muttered in husky tones, "God bless you!" and rushed out of the room again before Mr. Huddlestone had time to speak.

He spent the whole of that day in River Row, examining, questioning, and making voluminous notes, which seemed to promise a report much beyond what Mr. Buller anticipated, — while Mrs. Moss, in a laborious round of visits, made it known generally what an unprincipled man that Buller was, and what a disgrace it would be to the town were he elected churchwarden next Easter.

CHAPTER X.

TWICE WORSTED.

MRS. MOSS had rightly divined the previous day, when she saw Mr. Buller step majestically forth from the gateway of Wycherley Court, that he had been to call on Mr. Tollmache. But she was quite in the wrong in suspecting him of having "fished up" an excuse for so doing. His cogitations the evening before had been wholly unproductive of any plausible reason for presenting himself at the Court, and without a plausible reason, he shrewdly calculated it would be better to stay at home, though he felt that his abstinence from a personal request for Mr. Tollmache's vote, was throwing a dangerous opportunity in the way of his rival. Those rascally tradesmen were such sneaking devils; and every one knew that the upper servants in a large establishment had a great deal of power in their hands. Of course Moss paid the steward a heavy percentage on the bills. What was to prevent his adding a little more, and inducing him to take an opportunity of mentioning to Mr. Tollmache what an

excellent, active man, Mr. Moss was, and how deeply interested in all that concerned the welfare of the town, and what an admirable churchwarden he would make, and how grateful he would be for Mr. Tollmache's vote? And really, the excellence of his goods, and the punctuality with which all orders were executed, was quite remarkable. There might even be a sidelong glance at a very questionable character named Buller, who was likely to stand against him.

And at that very moment Mr. Tollmache was looking up the name in his pocket book, and desiring that a verbal message might be sent early next morning to Mr. Buller's office, requesting him to call in the course of the day.

The message was delivered a few moments before Mr. Buller entered his office, and arriving at that particular moment, it almost startled him, though what, under ordinary circumstances, could be more probable, than that any person coming to live in Monksford or the neighbourhood, should shortly find himself obliged to seek, in some form or other, the advice of Mr. Octavius Buller?

In spotless waistcoat, shining hat, and faultless gloves, he presented himself that afternoon at the door of Wycherley Court, and was forthwith admitted, and shown into the library. Mr. Tollmache was lingering over the luncheon table, where his daughter, placidly bored, was doing the honours of the table to some passing visitors, whose fearfully developed appetites caused her to look forward with daily dismay to the luncheon hour.

"Buller!" he said, glancing at the card. "Mr.

Octavius Buller! Oh, I know, it is the fellow Mr. Huddlestone recommended me to apply to about some pasture land. Where is he, Markham?"

"In the library, sir."

"Very good. Let him wait."

"That is the man Mr. Lawrence told us about, father," put in Kate, "who is so much to blame about the drainage of the town."

"Really? Well, perhaps he could supply some good sewage manure for the kitchen garden; Butterfield wants to try some. Some sherry, Markham!"

Mr. Tollmache drank his sherry, and chatted a little longer, and then getting up, lazily stretched himself, and sauntered away to the library.

There the great Octavius Buller had been waiting all this time, in an attitude at once assumed on entering the room, and deemed by himself the very perfection of dignified carelessness. He was standing with his back to the chimney-piece, holding his cane and glossy hat in one hand, while he lightly flecked off some particles of dust from the latter with one of his gloves. His greeting to the master of the house as he entered was, in his own eyes, a model of courtly urbanity: unfortunately it struck Mr. Tollmache's prejudiced notice as a masterpiece of consequential impertinence, and his own bearing was at once determined thereby. He nodded carelessly, and seating himself, said rather peremptorily—

"Sit down. Your name is Buller, I think?"

"Yes, Mr. Tollmache, that is my name. I am, as I daresay you are aware, an architect of long standing in this town."

"Oh, I daresay; but I don't know anything about

it. Your name was mentioned to me by Mr. Huddlestone."

"Our worthy mayor!—yes, Mr. Tollmache."

"I sent word to you to call in consequence. I want to rent some good pasture land. I have not enough with the house for my horses. Mr. Huddlestone thought you might be able to find some for me."

"I shall be most happy, Mr. Tollmache, if I can be of any service to you."

"There is no service; it's a mere question of business. Do you happen to know of any land in the neighbourhood suitable?—good land, and in such a position as that I could safely turn my hunters into it for the summer months."

"I am not at this moment aware; rather, I should say, I do not recollect whether I have any on my lists. I had some excellent land on hand a short time since, but that I have let to Mr. Mostyn, at Ripley Lodge. But if you'll allow me, Mr. Tollmache, I'll turn the matter over, and I have little doubt I shall soon be able to accommodate you. I do a great deal of such business for different country gentlemen in this neighbourhood. Would you favour me with some idea of the number of acres you require?"

"Oh, ten to fifteen would be enough. I wish to have it immediately."

"The business shall have my most instant attention, Mr. Tollmache; and I think I can confidently predict a speedy fulfilment of your wishes."

"Then that is all," Mr. Tollmache said, rising.

"As I have had the honour of being summoned to

attend upon you, Mr. Tollmache, you will perhaps allow me, before I leave, to draw your attention to one little circumstance."

"Concerning this land?"

"No, not concerning the land; concerning another matter, in which, I may venture to say, you are somewhat interested."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"The office of parish churchwarden, Mr. Tollmache, will be the subject of an election next Easter, our present respected representative having announced that he does not intend to stand again. This is a matter of some importance to the parishioners; and I would venture to mention to you that it is my intention to offer myself as their representative. If I might venture to hope that you—"

"Oh, you want my vote. I don't even know that I have one. But if I have, these are things in which I never trouble myself to interfere. Good morning!"

"Thank you, Mr. Tollmache. Good morning! I am much honoured by the confidence you have reposed in me. Your requirements shall have my most immediate attention."

With that the great Octavius got himself out of the room as best he might. He had not prospered, that was certain. He had straddled his widest, strutted his utmost, made use of his most imposing tones, but all to no purpose. He had evidently failed to impress Mr. Tollmache with a fitting sense of what was due to him. He had, in truth, been treated exactly like a tradesman, and had been bluffly repulsed when he attempted to wander from the business on which he had been summoned. He

was both mortified and angry, but he was not the man to be crushed by a repulse. He set his teeth as he walked down the elm avenue, and swore an oath that one day or other he would walk down it as its master.

He saw Mrs. Moss furtively watching him emerge from the gateway; he espied Dr. Playfair coming up the High Street,—and his spirits revived. They would see that he had been to Wycherley Court. They would not see how he had fared there. The rest was in his own hands. From that day forward the name of Tollmache would be always at hand to serve as occasion might require. When he wished to impress upon a hearer the greatness of those with whom he was acquainted, he could remark, "I was speaking of it quite lately to the Honourable Mr. Tollmache." When he desired to show the intimacy of his acquaintance with the great, he could carelessly say, "Tollmache said to me the other day, 'If you think it of importance, Buller, I'll take the matter into consideration at once.'" He straightway bore down on Dr. Playfair.

"Good afternoon, doctor. How are you? Suffocating weather, isn't it? I've just been with Tollmache, on a little matter of business; and I can tell you it's a most confoundedly hot walk down that avenue."

Dr. Playfair was at the moment, very hot himself, and much worried about a patient, so not quite in humour to be patronised by Mr. Buller.

He replied rather shortly,—

"Yes, I should think it was hot. So you've been at the Court, have you?"

"Yes. I've been chatting with Tollmache for some time. A nice, pleasant fellow, don't you think so?"

"I've never spoken to him. You didn't see Miss Tollmache, I suppose?"

"No."

"Ah, well, I did yesterday. She was asking me about you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Some one has been telling her about the fever cases and bad drains. I expect you won't find her nice and pleasant if you come across her."

"Perhaps not. I suppose she only likes people who cringe to her and toady her."

"I don't know about that. But I can tell you one thing. If an indignation meeting is got up over the drainage question, your friend Tollmache has promised to take the chair. I suppose he did not tell you that."

After this slight skirmish they parted, and Mr. Buller went to his office, not quite easy at what he had heard. He straightway despatched "my clerk" to the builder whom he generally employed, with an intimation that he wished to see him that evening at his own house, and then went home; dropping in on the way at Dyson and Dyer's to talk in a careless way about some library fittings which "Tollmache" had been showing him, which were the best he had ever seen.

The builder came, and was received most condescendingly by the great man. "I want you, Critchett, to be prepared to look into that house in River Row, No. 9, the moment those Parkers are

out. They must be out of the place by the 23d inst. The house must be instantly cleaned out and thoroughly disinfected, and you must take up the floors. I am much afraid, in setting up their laundry business, they've played some devil's work with the drains. It must be looked into at once."

"Certainly, Mr. Buller. Perhaps I'd better just call round and see what'll be wanted for the house at once?"

"Ah, do, by all means. You can call and let me know, when you've been."

After a few more directions regarding papers, plastering, and such matters, the man went away, leaving Mr. Buller in a chequered frame of mind. He was highly pleased at the skilful and vigorous manner in which he had checkmated the town council, as he believed; but not quite so well satisfied with the conditions of his other schemes.

"Confound, the fellow," he muttered, as he thought over Mr. Tollmache's supercilious coolness; and he devoutly wished that Wycherley Court had been his property. It would have given a zest to his pursuit of the same, could he have ousted Mr. Tollmache from ownership instead of merely from tenancy; and at the moment, he did not see how he was to get hold of the owner. Still, so strong in his own mind was the conviction that the place would come into the market in time, that he took courage, and only wished he could find out what were the terms of Mr. Tollmache's lease.

He was in a tolerably complacent mood for the next two days. In the evening of the second day, however, the builder came again, and it struck Mr.

Buller that there were symptons in his manner of some secret gratification.

"I've been to the house, Mr. Buller. There's a great deal wants doing, sir."

"Ah, I was afraid those people were very bad tenants. I ought to have turned them out long since."

"Well, I don't know that it's altogether their fault. The house has been badly built. They're all badly built. I shouldn't wonder if they all fell down some day."

"Nonsense! There's nothing the matter with the houses."

"Well, there is with the drains, sir. They smelt most awful to-day; after the rain yesterday, you see, sir. They're in a shocking state, there can be no doubt about that. Mr. Porter was saying to me he was downright sick with the smell himself."

"Porter! What, the town surveyor? What the devil was he doing there?"

"Oh, didn't you know, sir? I understood the matter had been settled at the last meeting of the town council. I thought you would certainly be aware."

"Aware of what?"

"That a thorough examination is going on into the state of the drainage in that district. Mr. Smithson and Mr. Porter have been down in River Row all day, hard at work."

"Damnation! The fools!" Without distinctly stating to whom these expletives referred, Mr. Buller strode up and down the room. The builder turned towards the window to conceal a visible grin

of satisfaction. Self-interest required him to treat with obsequious deference a man who possessed much house property. All the more did he inwardly exult over the evident impending discomfiture of the "shabby rascal," as he was wont to term Mr. Octavius Buller, when speaking in strict confidence to a friend. "If the council do really go into this matter," the surveyor had remarked aside to him, "there'll be good work for you, Critchett, and a thumping sum out of Buller's pocket." So, all things considered, Mr. Critchett was in high good humour.

He was soon curtly dismissed, with orders to do nothing more until he heard again from Mr. Buller. Then the injured victim of a persecuting fate resumed his hasty walk up and down the room, and after venting a few random curses upon men and things in general, proceeded to anxious meditation on the present unlucky turn of affairs. The more he reflected, the more disastrous the situation appeared to grow. He knew better than anyone else all that a thorough examination of his house property would bring to light; and it was not only his pocket that would suffer, but his reputation likewise; and the latter mishap would occur at a singularly inauspicious moment. What could he do? From whence seek for some means to lessen, if not entirely avert, the threatened catastrophe? The surveyor was in no way entangled with him, but he would probably not appear before the council. The substance of his discoveries would be embodied in Smithson's report. What had taken Smithson? Had he gone mad? or had some irresistible pressure been put upon him? Probably the latter. And with this view of the subject,

the spirit of the harassed Octavius began to revive a little. Smithson might have been compelled in the matter of investigation; he could not be compelled in regard to the exact terms of his report. His debt was heavy, and, as Buller knew, a terrible burden to him. The creditor had therefore two courses open to him, according to the temper of the debtor,—either force, by threat of instant proceedings, or bribery, by a promise of, if necessary, total release. He could therefore doubtless greatly modify, by one means or the other, the character of the report. All Moss's weight would be thrown into the scale against publication of details calculated to induce the council to incur serious expense. There would be only the mayor and an insignificant minority on the other side. Really, after all, the case was not so bad as it looked.

The logical sequence of Mr. Buller's conclusions in these reflections was unimpeachable; the flaw, unfortunately for him, being not in the conclusion, but in the premises, and therefore lying quite beyond the province of reason, in that realm of fact over which reason has no jurisdiction. Had he only known all the results which had followed upon the single fact of Mrs. Buller having, on a certain evening, walked down the High Street in a rather shabby bonnet and gown, he might have formed a clearer estimate than had yet dawned upon him of the importance of the feminine element in life; and perhaps discovered how urgent is the necessity for those who are very much whitened externally, to be careful of the minutest points in external appearance, lest prying eyes should chance to detect

a peep-hole, through which to obtain a glimpse of the back side of things.

His first step must clearly be to see Smithson, and find out the cause of this extraordinary departure on his part from the line of action marked out for him so clearly by Mr. Buller. In order to be ready for any course which it might be desirable to follow he looked up the bond which had so long held the unlucky surgeon in his iron grasp, and carefully calculated the utmost, in either the direction of force or bribery, which its possession placed in his power. It seemed, when strained to its utmost limits, a mighty engine in either direction; and much encouraged, he resolved to test its powers the first thing next morning.

With this view he sought an early interview with his victim, wondering whether he should be denied admittance. On the contrary, Mr. Smithson, who was himself standing at his door, on the point of going out, received him with an easy indifference of manner which somewhat perplexed him.

"You are just in time, Mr. Buller. I should have been out in a few moments. I am so busy just now, that I am obliged, as the saying is, to take time by the forelock."

"Perhaps you are too busy to give any attention to me and my unimportant affairs," retorted Mr. Buller, with a sort of savage sarcasm of tone. He expected at least to be treated with submissive humility by his impecunious debtor.

"Not in the least. I was in fact rather anxious to see you."

"Really? I hardly expected to hear that."

"Did you not? Well, such is the case. I don't know whether you are aware that we have begun our investigation into the drainage business?"

"We?" repeated Mr. Buller.

"Yes, of course I have taken the surveyor with me. Had you not heard of it?'

"Well, yes, I did hear something about it. I was, I confess, rather surprised, Mr. Smithson. I thought, when I saw you after the last meeting of the council, you had resolved on a different course."

"So I had. But one can't always forecast one's actions, you know. Circumstances alter necessities. The fact is, a pressure was put upon me to act at once in this matter which it was impossible for me to resist."

"Indeed!" snarled Mr. Buller, laying his debtor's altered tone to the score of reckless bravado, under the belief that a member of the corporation, known to have strong interests in the question, would not care, at such a moment, to press heavily upon a man holding the official post of health officer to the town.

"Of course, then, you are prepared for all consequences."

"Indeed, my good fellow, I fear it is you who have to dread the consequences. I am sorry to say that I fear my report must be an unpleasant one to you to hear. These things are most painful and disagreeable; but in my official capacity I am of course obliged to put aside all private feeling. I regret to say, Buller, the state of your houses is most unsatisfactory. In fact, I may fairly tell you, that I greatly fear I shall have some difficulty in so

wording my report, as to avoid laying you open to the charge of criminal negligence."

To describe the sensations of Mr. Octavius Buller as he listened to this harangue, would be simply impossible. His jaw dropped, and he sat with slightly quivering lips, staring at the speaker in mute amazement. Was he the victim of some hideous nightmare? Was it possible that he heard Smithson, the surgeon, the man hopelessly in his debt, addressing him, not merely without one single trace of humble deference in his tone and manner, but actually with an assumption of perfect equality, and in language of grave censure?

"Are you mad?" he gasped at last.

"I hope not," replied the audacious Smithson. "But I think you must have been slightly so yourself before you, a member of the corporation, who must have known that sooner or later this drainage question would be forced upon your attention, whether you liked it or not, could allow your own houses to be in the state in which they are."

"By heavens—this is too much!" exclaimed Mr. Octavius Buller, turning white with anger, and almost gnashing his teeth. "Do you remember, sir, the relative positions in which we stand?'"

"Perfectly. You are a member of the town council; I, the health officer of the town."

"I don't mean our official relations, sir. I wish to know if you recollect that you are deeply in my debt?"

"Oh, Mr. Buller, we are not now considering our personal relations. They should never be mixed up with our official duties."

"By God, but they shall, sir! Do you think I'm going to be bearded by you? Do you remember the amount of your bond?"

"I believe I have a note of it. I am not sure that I remember at this moment the exact sum.

"Then I can help your memory, sir; for I have the papers with me. You perhaps don't remember that you are bound to pay on demand, at three days' notice?"

"I knew it was something of the kind."

"Oh, you did? Then, Mr. Smithson, I'll trouble you to understand that I require payment of this debt in full three days hence, and that I'll stand no nonsense and no delay. If the money is not paid down to the moment, sir, I shall institute legal proceedings immediately."

"My good friend, don't put yourself in a passion. One would think you were afraid you were going to lose your money. You had better have it at once, if it will be any satisfaction to you. What is the exact sum? I daresay I've cash enough in the house to pay you at once."

Mr. Buller sat speechless. Mr. Smithson leaned back in his chair, regarding him with a calmly complacent smile.

"I'd rather have cash than a *cheque* certainly," he said at last, with an effort to maintain his bullying tone.

"I shall be delighted to oblige you. I don't generally keep much cash in the house; it's not safe for a forlorn bachelor, who has to be out the best part of the day,—but I daresay I have as much as will be wanted. Kindly name the exact amount."

Mr. Buller named the sum—"Seventy pounds."

"Seventy?" repeated Mr. Smithson; "yes, I think that is correct. I am almost certain I have as much as that by me."

He went to his writing-table as he spoke, and unlocking a drawer, took out his precious bundle of notes, and seating himself again proceeded to count them over in a most leisurely manner; Buller watching him the while with an expression of bewildered, half-cowed ferocity. He had thought himself prepared for every possible course of action on the part of his debtor; but of an instant settlement of his claim, and subsequent loss of his vice-like grip upon the victim, he had never for a moment dreamed! It was the last thing he expected, and certainly, at the moment, the last thing he desired.

"Seventy pounds! Just about all that I have in the house, besides a little change. I assure you how very fortunate," remarked the unperturbable Smithson. "Kindly oblige me by counting these notes, Mr. Buller. I think you'll find the amount correct.

Mr. Buller sullenly did as he was requested. "All right," he said.

"Then I think we've only to draw the receipt, and then the whole matter is satisfactorily settled. I am so glad to have had the money in the house. Perhaps it was as well you didn't call to-day after all. I'm a poor man, Buller, as I've often told you, to oblige you, if you're pressed. I have, very rarely, much spare cash."

"Devil take you, and your cash," muttered the

infuriated creditor, flinging the cancelled bond across the table. "Do you suppose, if I wanted money, which is about the last thing likely to happen, I'd have any from *you?*"

"No, I don't suppose you would, for, as I said, I'm a poor man, and don't think I could manage even to oblige a friend. Now I must really go; and you'll think about those houses of yours, won't you? It would be a good thing, my dear fellow, if you were able to state, at the next meeting, when my report is read, that you were already taking steps to remedy the condition of things there. I fear you'll have to go to considerable expense, but it can't be helped; and I'll try and smooth the matter over as much as I can conscientiously, you know."

Mr. Octavius Buller could stand no more. He sprang up with an oath, and without the ceremony of one parting word, banged out of the house. Then Mr. Smithson, starting up from his seat, proceeded to indulge in a violent pantomimic performance of most eccentric nature, extremely suggestive of exuberant delight. It was a moment of triumph, such as might well manifest itself in violent external action. For nearly three years he had endured the bitter humiliation of being compelled to endure, without any show of resentment, the arrogant insolence of the man to whom he owed money which he could not pay; but in that short half-hour he felt that he had reaped a full harvest of vengeance. He fathomed the motives and intentions of his creditor to their utmost depths, and fully appreciated the force of the blow so unexpectedly dealt to him.

But sweeter far than revenge, dearer than the fullest appreciation of the humiliating defeat inflicted upon his foe was the sense of freedom—the feeling that he owed no man anything—was in no man's power, and could boldly act as an honest man should, without fear of any created being. And if there was at that moment a human being on earth for whom he would have laid down his life, it was the mayor of Monksford.

CHAPTER XI.

AN EVENTFUL RIDE.

WYCHERLEY Court possessed a church path; that is to say, a little private foot-path, crossing the park, and entering through a small wicket gate directly into the church-yard. By the Wycherleys of past generations this privilege had been highly appreciated, as it enabled them to attend divine service without any necessity for mingling with the common herd of their fellow-worshippers, and in consequence to confess that they were miserable sinners from a distinctly different standing-point. To Mr. Tollmache and his daughter this view of the case did not present itself. Kate enjoyed the quiet stroll across the park, and Mr. Tollmache regarded it chiefly as advantageous in substituting turf for a dusty road, to the great benefit of his boots.

This church path was becoming, however, a source of serious loss to Monksford. It was quite as convenient a means of communication between the Court and the rectory, as between the Court and the church, and was, to tell the truth, very frequently

trodden by the rector. Yes, sad indeed are the doings of Olympians, occasionally! The great Octavious Buller, the man of substantial worldly position, the son of a professional man, and himself a person of social weight and influence in Monksford, had received at Wycherley Court a cool and cutting rebuff; yet, at that same place, Mr. Lawrence, the man of the people, the son of a tradesman in a provincial town, with little fortune to boast of beyond the few hundreds per annum his living brought him, was a constant and welcome guest, merely on the score of the social position accorded to his profession. That was the aspect the subject wore in the eyes of Mr. Buller himself, for though that church path kept him, as well as the rest of Monksford, ignorant of the absolute frequency of the rector's visits, he still knew enough to make him take a stern view of the injury done to the influence of the clergy, as a body, by the manifestation on their part of any tendency to make use of the social advantages granted to them professionally, in order to ingratiate themselves with people of superior rank.

Lady Clanraven had by no means renounced Wycherley Court, although she had renounced her niece. She cultivated really affectionate intercourse with Lady Jarvis, whom she had known in girlhood,—a Judas-like devotion, with oblique reference to Colonel Twyford; and from her she received much information; for let it not be supposed that only the lesser lights, which feebly glimmer in mundane twilight, delight to turn their twinkling rays upon the ugly side of things. Even the great orbs which shine in the higher firmament rejoice to light up with

their most searching and resplendent blaze the most disfiguring spots in a neighbouring orb. If we could but hoist a second sun into our planetary system, we can all imagine with what diligence he would try to shine his brightest just upon the spots which mar the perfect splendour of his great rival. "Miss Tollmache," Lady Jarvis wrote, "is really quite eccentric. I am afraid she is dreadfully radical; but then she is so inconsistent in her doings, one really does not know what to think. She has taken up a little girl in the town, the daughter of some surgeon, or apothecary, I believe, and is always taking her about with her. She has actually, I believe, had her out riding with her, which seems such a strange thing. Somehow one doesn't seem to commit oneself by taking anyone for a drive; but to be seen riding with anyone always seems to imply such intimacy and equality. But then, on the other hand, Miss Tollmache is most intimate with Lady Julia Fane, the Duchess's third daughter; and, at the same time, I am told the rector of the parish is quite the tame cat about the house. He is a most excellent man, really a most able preacher and admirable clergyman, but a man of no birth. Such contradictions are quite inexplicable. Poor dear Mr. Tollmache, I fear, must find it unpleasant. I am sure he is quite different. I should think he would be rejoiced to see his daughter well married."

Lady Jarvis's opinions were probably a reflection of her own sentiments. She would unquestionably have been delighted to see Kate Tollmache married, for she secretly regarded her in the light of a gigantic obstruction. Mr. Tollmache was a man

not very much past fifty years of age, and the removal of his daughter would at once transform him from merely possible prey into highly eligible game.

It was no disingenuous concealment of facts on Kate Tollmache's part which secured for the outspoken rector an unfailing welcome at Wycherley Court. Mr. Tollmache knew, just as well as did his daughter, that the man whom he received into intimate acquaintance had learned his letters in a parish school, and played marbles on half-holidays in the streets of a northern provincial town. "Well, and what of that?" he said to an acquaintance, who wondered somewhat over his taste. "He's a companion who never bores, never irritates, and never offends one. That's a deal more than can be said for many a man with a whole waggon-load of heraldic antecedents at his back. I'm ready enough to hoist my coat-of-arms as a defence against a pushing upstart, but I'll be hanged if it shall ever be a ponderous barrier between me and a first-rate fellow like Lawrence."

So Monksford was tantalised, knowing little, suspecting much, and inventing a great deal more. "Oh, yes," Miss Bradley replied to a question from Mrs. Tatnell, "my cousin knows the Tollmaches very well. Mr. Tollmache has been here several times of late, but you know the rector is a man who never talks, and he would not like it to be said that any chatter there might be about the Court came from *us*."

She spoke with a shade of dignified reserve in her tone and manner, laying a slight emphasis upon "us,"

as though to intimate that the rector's reserve did not extend to his own household, but that though Monksford in general might be regarded as common hunting ground, where all had equal rights, the Court preserves must be regarded as sacred, reserved for the special use of the rectory.

"Us, indeed!" muttered Mrs. Tatnell to herself. "I'll lay any wager, if he does go often to the Court, he takes good care you don't hear much about it." And then she went to confide to sundry friends that she did not in the least believe Mr. Lawrence was half so intimate at the Court as he tried to make out; but that for her part she never had believed his open avowal of his birth was anything but a piece of affectation, or that at heart he was not just as great a toady as most people who had risen in that way; and now it was coming out, when he'd a chance to make it appear as if he was very intimate with people of higher rank than himself.

"Well, I don't know about toadying," replied Mrs. Collier, who hated the rector's intimacy at the Court, but loved still more a chance of contradicting Mrs. Tatnell, "but I know I've just seen Miss Tollmache and Rose Playfair, and Mr. Lawrence and George Huddlestone, all come riding through the Court gateway together, and if that doesn't look like intimacy, I'd like to know what does. And such a silly, stuck-up little chit as that Rose Playfair looks on horseback, I never did see. George Huddlestone's going on finely. I know, when his father was his age, he stuck tight to business, and didn't go riding about the country with young ladies. But times are changed. It's no wonder there's no house good

enough for them in Monksford. I know, when my husband and I were married, although his relations were well off, and mine too, for the matter of that, we were content to begin with a small house, and everything quite simple. But now young people must begin where their parents left off."

Mrs. Tatnell was so much taken up with the annoyance of finding Mrs. Collier better supplied with information than herself, that she was unable to rally sufficiently to avail herself of the opportunity thus afforded to her of enlarging upon the evil effects of this growth of modern extravagance, in increasing the difficulties attending early marriage and settlement in life. But as the consequent tendency to increased immorality was her favourite aspect of the question, and as, at the moment, Miss Collier and one or two other young damsels were present, she had less to regret in the loss, than under more favourable circumstances for the display of strict moral principles. The presence of "sweet seventeen" is sometimes a barrier to even most edifying discourse. Miss Witham took up the theme from her own special standing-point.

"An indecorous proceeding, I must say. In her position, Miss Tollmache should know better. I should like to see what my cousin, the admiral's wife, would say if she caught one of her daughters going out to ride in that way without a proper escort."

"They had two grooms behind them," put in Miss Collier.

"My dear child," replied Miss Witham, with a patronising smile, "you don't understand; grooms

are not considered in the world proper escorts for young ladies. My cousin's daughters never ride, unless accompanied by their father, or some gentleman related to them."

"But whose could the second groom be?" queried Mrs. Tatnell.

"George Huddlestone's, of course. He was riding one of the mayor's horses."

"A groom already to ride behind them! Well, I never—" And Mrs. Tatnell left all the voluminous remainder suggested by the consideration of such enormities to the imagination of her hearers.

It was even as Mrs. Collier had said. At that very moment the quartette she had named were riding quietly along a shady lane, towards the breezy common, where the racecourse lay; Kate Tollmache and the rector, quietly chatting together, a few yards in advance of George Huddlestone and Rose. The latter was in a state of unalloyed rapture. She had a good seat for a beginner, and looked marvellously pretty in her riding-habit and hat, with her golden hair closely coiled at the back of her head, and her beautiful complexion tinged with a glow of colour which seemed to add a brighter sparkle to her blue eyes. She knew she looked well, and had she not known it, the look with which George glanced at her, from time to time, would have quite sufficiently revealed the fact to her. She knew too, in her secret heart—oh, rare and blissful sensation!—that she outshone Miss Tollmache. She felt new from head to foot. Her habit, her hat, and her gloves were all new; so too were her pretty toy whip, and her saddle and bridle;

whereas Miss Tollmache's habit and hat were anything but new; the latter showed stains, the former palpable repairs. Her saddle and bridle had seen service, and in place of a pretty lady's whip, she carried a hunting whip, shorn of its lash, mounted with a shabby, almost hairless fox's pad. Rose almost thought her own slightly built, quiet-tempered thoroughbred had a newer look than Miss Tollmache's bay mare, which in her eyes appeared rather bony. Thank heaven! her horse did not jump about so much. Then there was no painful contrast to "poor George." The rector was a tall, thin, but broad shouldered man, whose careless, easy seat showed a practised horseman, and who looked much better in the saddle than George Huddlestone could ever do, with his stout and somewhat clumsy build; but that was lost upon Rose. He was not particularly well dressed, and there was no air of dashing superiority about him, so she was very well satisfied, smiled sweetly upon George, and thought that she had never believed it possible anyone could be so happy.

On the common, Miss Tollmache insisted that Rose should practise jumping a little, and showed her how to take a low fence which ran across a part of the ground. It looked so easy, as she did it, that Rose went at it most courageously, and in a moment found herself heaved out of the saddle, and clinging helplessly to the pommels, with her stirrup gone, her reins loose, her hat shaken over her eyes, and wildly screaming to George to stop her horse. She was soon rescued and put right, but she steadily refused to try again; she did not like being jolted about,

and made to look all untidy, in that way. Then they had a good long gallop over a wide stretch of common, and as she felt the easy spring of the horse under her, with the wind whistling past her ears, and the golden gorse flying by in what seemed one unbroken band of yellow, and George keeping close by her side, it seemed to her that she was revelling in the very paradise of motion. The best of waltzes was nothing to this. She heaved a sigh when at last they stopped.

"Well done, Rose!" said Miss Tollmache, with a smile. "You are becoming quite a horsewoman."

"Oh, Miss Tollmache, it was so delightful. Why did you stop? we might have gone on for miles."

"But the horses!"

"Couldn't they have gone on?"

"They are not brooks, you know. They can't go on for ever. That was a pretty fair distance for the pace. I don't think they will be any the worse of walking quietly back along the course we have come."

They turned and rode slowly back, George Hudderstone and Rose coming up beside the other two, so that they were riding all four abreast, Rose between George and the rector, and Miss Tollmache on the near side. Rose looked round at Mr. Lawrence, and thought that riding must be very good for him. She had never seen him look so well,—quite handsome, in fact.

"You enjoy it, don't you, Mr. Lawrence?"

He turned his dark eyes suddenly upon her, as if he suspected some hidden meaning in her words, then smiled at her pretty, flushed childlike face, and laughingly replied,—

"Extremely."

"Ah, look, Miss Tollmache!" she exclaimed, "they are doing up the grand stand already, preparing for the races. It's the Duke of Bermondsey's private end they are fitting up. Dyson & Dyer have orders to do it up so beautifully. They were telling mamma this morning about it."

"I see. One can't exhibit Serene Highnesses for nothing. Shall you be at the races, Rose?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Would you like to go?"

"Oh, indeed I should, very much!"

"I can give you some tickets for the grand stand, if you like."

"Oh! thank you! But are you not going, then, Miss Tollmache?"

"Yes; I shall be there, but I can give you tickets all the same."

She did not add that she was one of the favoured few honoured with an invitation to bask in the presence of royalty among the Duchess of Bermondsey's guests. The Duchess was always most gracious to the Tollmaches. She had five sons.

"Shall you be there, Mr. Lawrence?" Kate added, after a moment.

He turned towards her with a smile,—

"Need you ask?"

"I fancied not," she replied, as though fully answered. "Only you set aside so much. I did not know—"

"Not so much as that. There is an element in it all too unclerical. But who comes there?" he broke off, pointing with his whip towards a solitary horse-

man, who was cantering along the turf towards them.

"Is it Herbert Pendennis? It looks like his horse. No, it is not he. It is more like Mr. Mostyn."

"It is not Mr. Mostyn," the rector said. "It is some one whom I do not know," he added, as the horseman approached.

It was some one, however, whom Rose Playfair did know, or rather had seen, and a crimson flush rose to her face almost at the very moment that Kate Tollmache said, in a low but surprised tone,—

"It is Mr. Wycherley!"

Mr. Wycherley recognised her at the instant, and suddenly pulling up, took off his hat. Rose, glancing round, noted the stately coolness with which his salutation was returned. He drew back, and, allowing them to pass, wheeled round behind them, and passing to the near side, brought his horse up beside Miss Tollmache.

"So you have come to England, at last," she said.

"I have been here before."

"And are you come now to see what we are doing to your "ruinous old chateau?'"

"On the contrary; it was my anxiety to know whether you were not nearly dead of rheumatism or influenza, through inhabiting that mouldy old dungeon, which brought me."

"To say nothing of the races, ball, and His Serene Highness," she replied.

"Those were ulterior considerations, dependent upon the relief of my anxiety on your account."

"Where are you staying?"

"At Eaglescliff. Lady Jarvis bade me come and

make acquaintance with the country, which, as she expressed it, she hoped would one day be my home. She has not yet asked me how long your tenancy of Wycherley is to last, but she expatiates largely on the paradise it is becoming under Mr. Tollmache's hands; and then always appears to me to conclude, by a pensive contemplation of the—ahem—waning charms of the so-called golden-haired Clarissa. I have an invitation of unlimited span."

"Lady Jarvis's hospitality is well bestowed!"

"It is gratefully appreciated. The neighbourhood has great attractions, if Eaglescliff has not. May I come and see how you are wasting your substance on my dilapidated patrimony?"

"I am sure my father will be pleased to see you."

"And Mr. Tollmache only?"

"That depends upon how soon you come. My aunt Clanraven and my cousins are coming next week. I think you know Lady Clanraven? I don't doubt she will be delighted to renew her acquaintance."

"I have the greatest respect for Lady Clanraven, but I did not come all this way to see her. I shall take an early opportunity of calling."

He rode on in silence for a short time, and then saluted his somewhat repellant companion with a half-deferential, half-beseeching air, and turned away. Kate Tollmache turned towards Mr. Lawrence with a scarcely repressed sneer.

"How touching is a manifestation of meek amiability," she said. "I believe, did I kick him, he would thank me, and ask me to do it again."

He smiled, a little gravely, without replying. The cold and scornful demeanour which she had assumed was not attractive. Rose looked at her, and wondered how it was possible that Miss Tollmache could be so different in manner from what she had ever known her to be? and how could she be so cold and distant to Mr. Wycherley? How pleadingly he had looked at her, and how handsome he was; how beautifully dressed. Oh, how shabby and mean he made the other two men look! with his white corduroys and top boots; his close-fitting riding-coat, and jaunty little cap, planted firmly on his dark, glossy, curling hair. She glanced at "poor George," and sighed heavily. Miss Tollmache might say what she liked about tailors' fashion books, but she was sure it was much better to be a little too particular about dress than too careless. Then a faint smile of gratified vanity stole over her face; for had she not detected, by a furtive glance that more than once, when speaking to Miss Tollmache, Mr. Wycherley's dark eyes were fixed upon herself, with admiration as unmistakable as that she had once before read in them, if a little less undisguised.

And while she thus meditated, honest George was noticing her abstraction; and, laying it to a wrong cause, was considering how he could best sweep away the clouds from the fair face of his pretty rosebud.

He and Rose Playfair stopped at her father's house, leaving the rector to escort Miss Tollmache home. After a brief silence, Kate turned towards her companion smiling, though with a slightly exculpatory manner.

"Do you think me a very acrid specimen of humanity?" she asked.

"The question is too vague for an answer."

"Well, then, was I too insolent to that scented Adonis?"

"I do not think you were insolent at all. Whether you were too coolly scornful must depend upon his deserts. I am not in a position to judge."

"His deserts are the same as those of dozens of other people. Can you picture to yourself, Mr. Lawrence, the position of an heiress, if she possesses a grain of penetration? A perpetual mark for flattery and hypocritical adulation. Everyone knows that I am my father's only child, and can calculate the rest. You have very little idea of the amount of virtues and graces with which that one circumstance has endowed me. Men and women, alike, pay court to me merely as a sort of incarnation of a certain number of thousands. I believe they hardly recognise me as an individual human being. I really believe, if anyone would say boldly to me I do not care the least for you personally, I only adore you as the representative of a certain amount of wealth, out of which I hope to reap some benefit, I should feel strongly drawn at once to him or her as at least honest."

"You had better not express such a sentiment too freely, lest you yourself teach those interested the lesson, that the most deadly form of dissimulation is the simulation of perfect candour. One extreme is generally only the other wrong side up, though it has an attractive look when we are recoiling in disgust from its opposite. It is not until we

rush into it that we find out the truth, and not always then."

"I suppose it is so," she replied, rather wearily. She did not pursue the subject, although she often spoke more unreservedly respecting her own position to the rector than to anyone else. His manly simplicity of character, and straightforward methods of speech, had a powerful attraction for her. In her secret heart, at the moment, she was sadly contrasting her own lot with that of Rose Playfair, envying her the portionless estate which gave her absolute certainty that an honest loving heart had chosen her for herself alone, and not for the sake of all which followed in her train. She had been herself too entirely accustomed from infancy to unlimited freedom in the matter of clothes, trinkets, baubles, and all manner of decorations and adornments, personal or otherwise, to be able to estimate correctly their value in the eyes of less highly favoured feminine human nature.

George Huddlestone left Rose at her father's gate, telling her he would see her in the evening, and then rode thoughtfully home. Poor little Rose was disposed to be pensive. She had been engaged some time now; the novelty of the situation was wearing off, and some of the vexatious realities of every-day common-place life were beginning to assert their power again, seeming all the more disagreeable by contrast with the artificial elysium in which she had been revelling.

She wanted at the moment to think about Mr. Wycherley, his handsome appearance, and evident admiration, and to wonder whether he meant to

come often to the neighbourhood? and whether there would be any chance that, when she was Mrs. George Huddlestone, he would visit at her house? She would like so much to have such men about the house! When she had everything handsome about her, they seemed only a fitting appendage to all the rest. She liked to be admired; of course, then, only to be admired in such a way as was becoming to a married woman; and, perhaps, too, such association would polish George up a little, and that would be such an advantage!

These were the meditations in which she would fain have indulged, but now nasty common-place vulgar difficulties would assert their presence, and claim consideration.

It was very kind of Miss Tollmache to offer her the tickets, and it would be delightful to go to the races. But what could she do about a dress? Alas, poor Rose! social slavery in one of its cruellest forms was laying its heavy burden upon her. She could not don her Sunday frock and hat, in which she looked as fresh and pretty as any girl need look, and thoroughly enjoy herself at the races, without fear, let, or hindrance. She must have an elaborate toilet for the occasion—to be obtained with toil and difficulty—worn, probably, with discomfort—and to weigh on her spirits like a nightmare should there be a single threatening cloud in the sky.

How was she even to obtain it?

"You must make the clothes you have do, Rose, until you are married," was her mother's oft-repeated injunction. "Of course, as you are marrying so well, you must have nice clothes then, and it will come very

expensive altogether. I really cannot afford to give you things now. No one expects a girl to have new dresses when it is known she is going soon to be married."

All true, but not consolatory, when the question of appearing at the races was concerned—when all the great people in the county would be there, Miss Tollmache herself among them, and all in beautiful costumes, fresh from Paris, and—and—when Mr. Wycherley would be there! Ah, what an enviable being was Miss Tollmache! who would just order a splendid costume, and never have an instant's further trouble until it was laid out for her to put on, in all its freshness and splendour, on the day of the races.

At about this point in her meditations George joined her, with such a happy contented look in his bright face and loving eyes, that she felt almost cross. It seemed as if there was no one to sympathise in her troubles. He sat down beside her, and looking lovingly down into her face said,—

"What's the matter, Rosebud? You look perplexed."

"Oh, it's so tiresome George!" she said, fretfully.

"What's tiresome, my pet?"

"About the races."

"Don't you want to go?"

"Yes, of course I do. I should like it of all things, but I don't know what to do. I've no dress to go in, and mamma says I must wait for any new dresses until all my wedding things are got, and I'm sure she'll be very cross if I ask her for a dress; and it's so provoking, this year, just when the races will be so unusually gay."

"You silly little girl," he replied, kissing her flushed cheek, "to make yourself miserable about nothing. Go off to-morrow morning, and concoct with the dressmaker the prettiest dress you can devise between you, and I'll make it all right with your mother. Only mind you make yourself look very charming, my fairy queen."

"Oh, George, how good you are," and the tears came up into her eyes; for all in a moment, as he spoke, a vision of herself, in a most gorgeous toilet, had flitted before her mental view, with Mr. Wycherley darting looks of fervent admiration, and the tears were owing to a very sharp pang of self-reproach which followed.

He kissed her again, and told her if she thought him good she must reward him by making herself look so pretty that he might feel certain every one was admiring her, and envying him his prize, and the words almost brought the tears of self-reproach afresh with their ring of honest, trusting love and confidence. And she registered many resolutions that night that she would try to be more worthy of all George's love and goodness.

Good resolutions, and all very charming, the bending down of the stronger nature to enter into and sympathise with the troubles and pleasures of the weaker one, and the quick response of impulsive love and gratitude. Still, not an episode exactly calculated to induce a feeling that Mrs. Huddlestone's uneasy sensations respecting her son's choice were altogether groundless.

Mr. Wycherley rode back to Eaglescliff rather sulkily. It is doubtless a Christian duty, when

smitten upon one cheek, to offer the other, but it is much pleasanter to return the blow with interest, especially if you feel your Christianity to be more muscular than the unregenerate nature of your opponent. And though the manifestation of Christian meekness and submission is doubtless rendered much easier when the injurious buffet is administered by a handsome heiress, the odds are mostly in favour of the chance that it will be shortly vicariously returned, with the result of a like opportunity of exhibiting a spirit of resigned meekness being afforded to some other unoffending member of creation, either human or animal.

Dinner found him seated beside the fair Clarissa, an arrangement which suited him, for he knew that information drifted through her, like water through a sieve; and that she was absolutely incapable of ever seeing more in a question than was conveyed by the bare words which fell upon the ear.

"I met Miss Tollmache during my ride this afternoon," he remarked, "on horseback, also."

"Spare me!" was the apparently irrelevant response, with a wriggle, intended to be a pretty little gesture of deprecating entreaty.

"Spare you what?"

"What one knows to be inevitable when a man begins to speak of having met Miss Tollmache on horseback, an eulogium on her figure and her riding."

"Is the subject intolerable?"

"Not at all; only disappointing. I had heard these eulogiums so often before I ever met her, that I was dying of anxiety to see her on horseback, and

when I did, I must say I was greatly astonished at all which I had heard."

"I noticed neither her nor her riding very specially," he carelessly replied; "I only observed that she was the best mounted of the party."

"Of the party? She was not alone then?"

"By no means. She was one of four."

"Who could the others be? I don't think any of their party have arrived yet. Mr. Tollmache you would have known."

"Mr. Tollmache was certainly not there. One of her companions was a clergyman; the other two were a stout, rather clumsy-looking young man, an unmistakable rustic, and a rather pretty-looking, fair little girl, of the simple wild-flower species."

"Oh! I know," exclaimed Clarissa, growing quite animated under the exhilarating influence of an opportunity of running Kate Tollmache down. "Really Miss Tollmache is too extraordinary for anything! The way in which she mixes herself up with all those horrid townpeople is beyond belief. The rector would be one of her companions; who the young man might be, Heaven only knows! but the girl is the daughter of a doctor in the town, with whom she has taken up, and is always having with her. I wonder what Mr. Tollmache thinks of it?"

"I once heard Mr. Tollmache tell her," replied Mr. Wycherley, with some malice, "that he did not care whose acquaintance she chose to make, as long as she brought no widows nor fading spinsters about the house. The little girl could certainly come under neither category."

"I suppose Mr. Tollmache finds it best to put up with what he cannot avoid," replied Clarissa, colouring slightly, "I fancy he has not much need to fear her bringing women, at least of her own class, about the house. She is not liked; her proceedings are too eccentric. I suppose that is why she takes up with such people."

"A doctor's daughter, I think you said the girl was. Is her name Tatnell? I remember my poor father often speaking of a Doctor Tatnell."

"Oh, no! he has been dead for years. Doctor Playfair succeeded to him. That girl is his daughter."

"She is a pretty little thing."

"So I have heard," Clarissa amicably replied. Rose Playfair was much too far removed from her sphere to be an object of dread. "All the same, I wonder at Miss Tollmache's taste, and I should think she had better be cautious. The girl, I don't doubt, is quite capable of trying to catch Mr. Tollmache. I wonder how she would like to see her *protégée* turn into her stepmother?"

A move on Lady Jarvis's part put a period to the conversation at this point, to the great relief of Mr. Wycherley. He had ascertained all he wanted to know, and began to be very tired of the outpourings of his companion, who left him smiling to himself a malicious smile over the contemplation of so delightful an idea as that of the magnificent Miss Tollmache being ousted from her throne by the young daughter of the local medical practitioner.

CHAPTER XII.

MINING AND COUNTERMINING.

ROSE PLAYFAIR set out the following morning with a very light heart to hold solemn conference with Miss Marshall, the dressmaker. It was to her a sensation as new as delightful to find herself critically weighing the comparative merits of various fabrics, colours, and patterns, without any inward misgivings about the cost of the results. Miss Marshall was all smiles and urbanity. The Playfairs had never been among her best customers; but she had a shrewd perception of future chances. Miss Playfair, as a bride elect, would alone have been worth deferential attention, even without the sequence of Mrs. George Huddlestone. The dressmaker's whole stock of raw material was therefore laid before her with alacrity for inspection; and after a long interview she went her way, quite satisfied that she had carried out George's instructions to the full.

It was a somewhat strange and elaborate structure which had been at length resolved upon; but it was what Miss Marshall oracularly pronounced would be

"a most elegant costume." She faithfully promised that it should be sent home by the end of the week; and with perhaps a prudent glance at the future, she made a note, not only of the promise, but also of the fact, that it was a promise which had better be kept.

Rose counted the hours until the day came, and then she could settle to nothing for incessant running to the window at every ring or knock, to see if the arrival might be the big milliner's box she knew so well. It came at last, and from it was lifted a great rustling package of carefully pinned-up papers. Rose's heart beat so fast she could hardly unfasten all the wrappings, to display the splendours within to the admiring eyes of her mother and sister. Mrs. Playfair duly applauded; but poor Alice fairly burst into tears. It did seem hard that everything should fall to Rose's share. Mrs. Playfair administered a maternal lecture.

"You must not be jealous of your sister, my dear. It is always the way when a girl is going to be married. You'll have a pretty bridesmaid's dress when Rose's wedding comes; and some day your turn will come, and you'll have all sorts of attentions and pretty things given to you, and Edith and Lucy will have to be content to look on. Rose must help to find you a husband when she has a nice house of her own."

So poor Alice was fain to content herself as best she might for present neglect, with the contemplation of uncertain future contingencies; and she went and looked at herself in the glass, and decided that she was quite as pretty as Rose, only in a different style, and registered a firm resolve that she would

lay herself out for the first good chance that came in her way, and would never marry any man who had not plenty of money.

Rose forthwith arrayed herself in all her magnificence, just to see that everything fitted, and then took a survey of herself, with such satisfactory results, that she turned to her mother with sparkling eyes, exclaiming,—

"O mamma, isn't it pretty? Won't George be pleased?"

But athwart her genuine pleasure at the thought, there shot an exultant sensation at the idea of Mr. Wycherley also seeing her clad in such unwonted splendour which made her wince for a moment, until she remembered how George had told her to be sure and make herself look so pretty that everyone should envy him his prize; and she could soothe all unpleasant sensations by assuring herself that she was only doing what George wished, which was, of course, her bounden duty; and that it would be most ungrateful not to try her utmost to please him, after he had been so kind.

George was, she knew, away from home for a day or two, so there was no chance of his dropping in that evening to stroll round the garden with her, and talk about the new house—plans for which were already under discussion, and a site actually chosen and partly prepared. She took a book, therefore, to read in the summer house after tea. But what chance had a book that evening? Those enchanting puffings and frillings, the exquisite lace ruffles for throat and wrists, which Miss Marshall had added unordered; and the coquettish little hat trimmed to

match the dress exactly, would keep rising before her mental vision, to sweep away all perception of the meaning of the words she was reading with her outward eyes. How charming her own delicate throat and wrists had looked, even to herself, surrounded by that gossamer lace! and how delightfully Miss Marshall had just manipulated the trimmings enough to give her figure a little of the fulness it wanted to make it exactly what it should be! She did not envy Miss Tollmache now. She did not believe her dress could be prettier, even if it did come direct from Paris. Then her thoughts flitted round to that side of the picture on which lurked envy, hatred, and malice. How disgusted Fanny Collier would be at her appearance. Fanny had asked if she were going to the races, and Rose had assumed semi-matronly airs. She really did not know; she did not care much about such things; and hardly thought she had a dress fit to appear in. Of course she did not care to get new things just now. She should have to get so many things when she was married, as George was very particular, and she should have to entertain a great deal. Perhaps if she could hunt up some old dress that would do she might go. Then Fanny Collier had exultingly described the beautiful dress her papa had got for her from London, and Rose has smiled superbly, and said she thought it would be pretty; but she supposed, herself, she should be sick of the sight of silk and lace before very long; and Fanny had looked satisfactorily mortified. Now she would be at the races, entirely outshining her boastful acquaintance in the splendour of her appearance, and seeming at

the same time to look down from her superior position with dignified unconcern on all such girlish trifles as dress and festivities.

It was no use trying to read, so she laid her book down, and resolved to stroll round the paddock. This paddock was a small one, lying immediately behind the garden, from which it was separated by a thick shrubbery, and which provided a modicum of hay for the stable use, and a place where one of Doctor Playfair's two well-worked horses might be occasionally turned out for a little rest, whenever he could afford one or the other that well-earned and much-needed treat. There was a path running completely round the paddock, which was only divided by a low hedge from the lane beyond, a quiet, little-frequented road, along which, in days now gone, it had often happened that George had chanced to stroll, when Rose was strolling along by the hedge on bright summer evenings.

Rose Playfair looked marvellously pretty that evening, far more so than ever she would look clad in all the splendours over which she was dreaming so complacently. She had had her beautiful hair washed that day; and as George was away, she thought there was no use in taking the trouble to dress for the evening, so she had only added a pretty little lace collar and ribbon to her clean print gown, and her hair, smoothly brushed back, and tied with a blue band, was floating round her in luxuriant freedom.

She was walking leisurely close by the hedge, singing to herself in a low tone, while she carelessly swung round and round by its elastic band the hat

which she had taken off, when the sound of a horse's hoofs, approaching slowly from behind, caught her ear. She did not turn. There was a back entrance to the stables from the lane, and it never occurred to her that the sounds could indicate anything beyond one of the horses coming back from the smithy, or something of that sort; the lane was rarely trodden by foot-passengers, still more rarely used by horsemen. The sounds, therefore, came gradually nearer without at all disturbing a very naughty, little visionary scene which she was conjuring up, in which Mr. Wycherley, standing within the barriers, just below the grand stand, chatting with some of the officers from the neighbouring town, and glancing with a critical air all over the stand, suddenly gave a little start of surprised admiration as his eyes fell upon herself, and rested there as if irresistibly fascinated. She saw it all in imagination so vividly that her song stopped, and she was smiling a little conscious smile, and dropping her eyes just as she would have actually done had her vision been reality, when a strange sort of undefined sensation brought her back to the paddock and herself, with a sudden perception that the horse was almost pausing close beside her. She turned with a start, and in a moment flushed crimson, even to the parting of her hair. Mr. Wycherley was as close beside her as the hedge would allow, reining in his horse to her own sauntering pace, and looking down upon her with a faint smile, but with nearly as vivid, if not quite as surprised admiration as she had been picturing to herself.

Rose was too much startled and confused at the

moment to do anything but stand blushing and hesitating, with a look of genuinely painful embarrassment on her face. Mr. Wycherley instantly became extremely grave, the admiring look vanished, and he raised his hat with an air of most respectful deference.

"I beg your pardon most sincerely," he said, "for startling you so thoughtlessly, but you will, I trust, excuse my pausing to ask you a question, if you will allow me. I daresay you know who I am, without my introducing myself?"

"Mr. Wycherley," said Rose, recovering herself a little.

"Yes; and I think that I am speaking to Miss Playfair?"

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"I could not resist asking who it was whom I met the other day riding with Miss Tollmache; nor could I be mistaken as to her identity with the—may I say it?—lady with the golden tresses whom I saw before me, just as I was perplexedly looking for some one to enlighten me."

Rose had forgotten all about her floating hair, and she coloured up again in some little confusion. But the tone was so respectful, and the admiration so dexterously insinuated, that she smiled a well-pleased smile at the same moment, a fact by no means lost upon Mr. Wycherley.

"What did you want to know?" she asked.

"Is there not somewhere along this lane a sort of back entrance to Wycherley Court?"

"None that I know of," she replied,—"at least, that is to say, none for a horse. There is a foot

path which crosses the park, and leads through the flower-garden, but nothing else."

"Thank you; then I am mistaken. Strange, is it not, that I should have to apply to you for information how to reach my own house? But I fancied there had been a back entrance, and rather wished to avoid taking this young and not very well broken-in horse along the streets of Monksford. That entrance is a great blot on the charms of my 'old chateau,' as I always call it."

"The people in Monksford do not think so. They are very proud of that old gateway. They think it the greatest ornament the town possesses."

"Ah, yes. They look at it from the natural embellishment point of view. I was thinking of its social disadvantages. I am just going to call at the Court on my way home to dinner. It seems strange, does it not, to be going to call at one's own house?"

"I wonder you can like to do it."

"I am cosmopolitan, you know—one of those wandering Ishmaelites who don't appreciate being firmly rooted in any given spot. But I must not detain you. I am much obliged to you for kindly saving me from wasting my time in a useless hunt for a non-existent entrance."

He raised his hat once more, with most profound respect, shot just one admiring glance out of his dark eyes, and rode away. "That would work," he said to himself, "yet it seems hardly worth the trouble, unless I am bound to remain longer than I expect. What a complexion she has! pure nature too. I hope to Heaven she knows nothing about

horses! Now then, old patriarch, bestir your stiffening limbs. I want to get home."

Rose meanwhile, after watching his retreating form for a few moments, made her way back to the summer house, and sat down to collect herself. A tumultuous host of mingled thoughts seemed to be whirling about in her brain. It seemed so strange that Mr. Wycherley should have appeared just at that very moment; and oh! how handsome he was! and what a charming voice and manner! There was something quite fascinating in the slight foreign accent with which he spoke English; and his whole bearing was distinguished by such graceful, easy polish! He was certainly the most charming man she had ever seen. Oh, if he would only come and live at the Court, and be one of her visitors after she was married! how delightful it would be, and what an advantage for poor George, who seemed a sadly common-place individual that night,—the gorgeous costume upstairs notwithstanding.

Rose Playfair appeared to have discovered a great deal in a very short time; but her estimate of Mr. Wycherley was far from an incorrect one, dealing, as it did, merely with externals. He was a very handsome man, and very fascinating when he chose. Nature had endowed him with some of the best points in both French and English bearing, and he had been trained in a highly polished school. A far more fastidious judge than Rose would have fully endorsed her opinion. He was a courted and favoured guest in most exclusive circles, and it was left to such daring rebels against social Shibboleths as Kate Tollmache to pronounce him a curled and

scented darling, with a substratum of vicious inclinations.

Rose Playfair was very bright and lively that evening. She chattered away merrily about a heap of things. George, and her hopes he would like the dress she had chosen; the splendours of that "elegant costume;" the races; the county ball; but not one word did she say of the little adventure of the paddock, which in truth occupied her thoughts far more than anything of which she did speak. She could not herself have given any distinct reason for a reticence which was unusual to her; but so it was, and therefore all her family remained in absolute ignorance of the irregular acquaintance which had sprung up between her and the fascinating owner of Wycherley Court.

Mr. Wycherley had lied pretty handsomely that afternoon all round. He had pleaded to Lady Jarvis an engagement to meet his steward for the arrangement of some important business, as an excuse to escape from an expedition in which he found it intended that he should be the companion on horseback of the fair Clarissa, having in reality not the most remote intention of seeing Haigg. Neither had he ever had the faintest thought of calling at the Court. His sole object, after shaking himself free from the toils of Eaglescliff, being to hunt up the doctor's pretty daughter, whose fair fresh child-like beauty had exercised upon him all the fascination which a beautiful wild flower may be supposed to possess for eyes somewhat wearied by incessant contemplation of gorgeous, rich-hued exotics. He had been riding about

the neighbourhood for some time, reconnoitring, when his search was so unexpectedly crowned with success, under circumstances which revealed to him all he wished to know, without the necessity of his asking any indiscreet questions.

The game of mining and countermining was being carried on at Eaglescliff at that moment with great skill on both sides. Mr. Wycherley's motives in accepting Lady Jarvis's invitation were about as like what she would have wished them to be, as were her professed, to her real ones in giving the invitation. He was far from being vain, but he was so accustomed to please, whenever it suited him to make the effort, that he counted upon success as a matter of course. When he had met the Tollmaches in Vienna, not long before his father's death, he had fully resolved to make a favourable impression on the heiress, although she lacked some of the graces which to his fastidious taste were necessary to complete the full perfection of feminine charms. Such points were not of great consequence in a wife with whom he need never be seen in company. He would not be ashamed of her presiding in his house, and she had, or would have, sundry thousands a-year. Having resolved, he never doubted he had succeeded; and he had been laying out future plans of operation, when his father's death for a time interfered with all his schemes. Mr. Tollmache's subsequent offer for Wycherley Court seemed to him, under the circumstances, a curious coincidence, and he had been revolving the best means of domiciling himself for a time in the neighbourhood, when Lady Jarvis's letter arrived. He

read it with a smile, took down a peerage, and referred to the Jarvis page. Though he had never at that time been in England, he had lived a great deal among English people, and had acquired much information theoretically. He knew Captain Jarvis, who was about his own age. He observed that there was a gap of a good many years between the date of Sir Myles Jarvis's marriage and the birth of his son, and that there were four daughters. His smile expanded into a laugh, and he muttered,—

"Thank you, my lady! you will serve my purposes admirably."

Accordingly, he had come, and had been much mortified, on first meeting with Miss Tollmache, by the discovery that he did not stand with her quite so favourably as he imagined. He was not a man to be easily foiled, but clearly more time would be required for the successful carrying out of his projects than he had anticipated; so he thought it would be as well to have business on hand which would be likely to detain him for some time in England, and accordingly he had it. Lady Jarvis, rejoicing and hopeful, cordially invited him to make Eaglescliff his home for as long a period as he chose, pathetically referring to a close bond of union established between the two families, by the kindness which she had as a girl received from his grandmother, and which she declared had for ever endeared the name of Wycherley to her heart.

Mr. Wycherley responded with much feeling that these old family friendships were the most charming things in creation, and doubly precious to one who, like himself, had hardly a relative in the world; and

forthwith set to work to consider how he might best, at one and the same time, advance his prospects of success with the heiress, and amuse his leisure by a little mild flirtation with the doctor's pretty daughter. The two designs were perhaps a trifle dangerous to carry on at the same time; but in that very fact there lay some little excitement, and life was very dull in this staid, demure, old English county circle.

His good fortune was not without its drawbacks. The conventionalities of life must be respected, and in return for board and lodging gratis, he was bound to devote a certain amount of time and attention to the daughters of the house. It was a heavy duty. He could only vary the quality, rather than the quantity, of tedium, by dividing his attentions between the two; shrewdly calculating that, so long as she hoped to catch him for either, Lady Jarvis would rest well content, and that, for the rest, whenever matters seemed likely to become serious, he must even decamp, and leave Ada and Clarissa to fight it out between them. He did not know which was the more wearisome to him. Clarissa could only grow animated in running down Kate Tollmache, or discussing such driblets of choice scandal from exalted realms as occasionally trickled into the thirsting regions of county society. Ada would only kindle into enthusiasm over music and the fine arts in general.

Mr. Wycherley had no artistic proclivities; but he was a man not devoid of natural abilities, and he could recognise instantly the divine gift when he met it in genuine existence. He hated the nonsense which called itself sense, but far more cordially did he hate the nonsense which called itself high art;

and accordingly, while he wearied over Clarissa with her pale eyes and hair, and voluble flow of meaningless chatter, he positively loathed Ada with her sentimental flights of artistic ecstacy.

In moments of special weariness or loathing, he was sometimes tempted to think he was really paying high for board and lodging, but in his calmer hours he recognised fully that such was not the case. The house was comfortable, the servants well trained, Sir Myles's cellar was good, and his stable creditable. No, he did not pay too dearly for all these advantages. Still a little external diversion would be a highly desirable addition, and favouring fortune seemed disposed to aid him most amiably in this respect. With Miss Tollmache and the doctor's daughter at hand, he thought he might well manage to sustain the requisite amount of Ada and Clarissa Jarvis to discharge his debts, without serious damage, for as long as he hoped might prove necessary to ensure the success of his objects and aims.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GREAT DRAINAGE QUESTION.

WHEN Mr. Octavius Buller fled, breathing imprecations, from the presence of his rescued debtor, he knew perfectly well that Providence had interfered with his projects in the tangible form of some benevolent human being.

Smithson, he was certain, could nearly as well have paid the national debt, as have scraped together that seventy pounds, without aid from some one; and who could it be who had thus torn his lawful prey from the mighty? He did not know of any-one in Monksford who was such a special friend of Smithson's as to be likely to advance him the money on any security which he could offer. The aid must surely have come, not so much in the shape of an act of friendship to the debtor, as in that of a demonstration of hostility towards the creditor. Though Smithson had not many friends, he knew that he had himself many enemies; still it was a heavy price to pay for the indulgence of even a strongly developed hostility, and as he ran

over in his mind the list of his special foes, he rejected one after the other as very unlikely to indulge in such costly vengeance.

Then the thought of Miss Tollmache came suddenly across him, and the remembrance of Doctor Playfair's words flashed through his mind. Doctor Playfair had, in truth, made much more of the matter than it deserved, in his anxiety to take down the conceit of the man he detested; for Miss Tollmache had merely asked him if there was really no chance any step might be taken to improve the drainage of the town, remarking that it was a most discreditable state of things. She had not even mentioned Buller's name. But now a strong suspicion sprang up in Buller's mind that he was indebted for this unlucky turn in his affairs to her meddlesome interference.

"Just the sort of thing a woman delights in doing," he muttered to himself, "and she has lots of money. I'll be bound she did it," and the thought of how entirely she was beyond his reach almost made him gnash his teeth.

Of course he was entirely wrong in his calculations. But there is a curious irony in the facility with which truth, even as regards mere matters of fact, will contrive to elude the grasp of those who are not, as a general rule, prone to make her the first object of their efforts; who are well enough contented with either error or falsehood, so long as the attainment of truth does not make for their advantage in some special case. Had Miss Tollmache been really the secret spring of this transaction, she would probably have been the last person upon

whom Mr. Buller's suspicions would have fallen. In the misleading bitterness of his animosity, he even blundered still further, for he conceived the idea that the Mephistopheles who had suggested this course of action to her was Dr. Playfair himself.

It was, however, clearly useless for him to waste his time in maledictions. Smithson was a free man, and was evidently bent upon making the utmost possible use of his newly acquired liberty. In the light of these unexpected occurrences, Mr. Buller began to regret that he had so often needlessly clanked the fetters in his captive's ears, with much that sort of repentance which a tyrannical cur, that has been won't to bite and maltreat a defenceless puppy, may be supposed to feel when he meets that puppy grown into a bigger, stronger dog than himself.

But such regrets were as useless as maledictions. The wisdom of the children of this world, in their generation, is proverbial; and it is no inconsiderable manifestation of the same, that they are not prone to indulge in a habit of walking backward through life, in order that they may contemplate and weep at leisure over the irretrievable errors of the past, but rather, forgetting those things which are behind, keep a steady look out straight a-head for such snares and pitfalls as may be lying hidden in the path before them. Mr. Buller recognised at once the necessity for turning his thoughts resolutely to the consideration of the best means he might devise for meeting the disastrous train of circumstances with which he found himself confronted. Here again

the tendency of truth to slip into places of concealment, while the common herd are tearing madly away in pursuit of some plausible phantom, led him wildly astray.

There was much chatter on all hands, and waggon-loads of information to be had for the asking. Mrs. Moss, in view of the coming struggle, had never for a moment relaxed her diligence in making known what an unprincipled man that Buller was. How he had, first, by his iniquitous neglect of his duties as a landlord, brought cruel misfortune into the house of a respectable, hard-working woman, and then ruthlessly persecuted her, in the hope of getting rid of the family before any investigations were made, which might bring the wickedness of his conduct to light. Mrs. Tatnell, ever smarting under Mrs. Moss's aspersions upon her husband's professional skill, and insinuations respecting her own addiction to cheap groceries, vehemently dashed into the embroglio from the opposite side. She had no personal respect for Mr. Buller, she said—in fact, he was almost a stranger to her; but people who lived in glass houses should mind what they did with stones. There were other nefarious ways in this world of making money besides preying upon tenants, and which possessed the advantage of being more likely to escape detection; and if all the secret trade transactions of some people were brought to light, she fancied there were some who held their heads very high now who would be glad to hide them low enough.

Mrs. Moss and Mrs. Tatnell occupied much the position of leaders in the conflict; the rank and file

ranging themselves on either side, according as inclination led or necessity required; the hapless trimmers skulking in terror on the borders of the fight, eagerly watching for some signs which might portend on which side victory was most likely to declare herself.

The amount which two active talkers, bent on mischief, can achieve, may be fairly calculated by the amount they can accomplish without any special purpose. Monksford was soon in a ferment of more than ordinary activity, and the wildest stories flew hither and thither, the sport of the social whirlwind, fighting and struggling with one another, or becoming so hopelessly entangled in the mad dance that they were doomed to irrevocable companionship, and to float about an inextricable mass of irreconcilable contradictions.

Mr. Buller heard it all; laughed at some things; gnashed his teeth at others; but on the whole took courage. Things were bad enough as they were, but they might have been worse. Had all this stirring of muddy waters occurred a few months later, when the churchwarden election was close at hand, it would have been much more serious. The chatter, the talk, the virtuous indignation would die out; it would be the action of the town council which would abide, and stand as an enduring momento of what had really happened. It was therefore towards influencing that action that all his thoughts were turned; and it was in his calculations on that point that the escape of truth from the ken of the prying multitude so entirely misled him. He had not the faintest suspicion of the line of action

which his rival had taken up in the matter. He had heard pretty nearly everything which could be said upon the subject; but he had not heard that Mr. Moss, braving the terrors of infection in his zeal for the public welfare, had himself visited the scene of action; had asked a great many questions, and taken notes of a great deal of highly significant matter, which could hardly be embodied in an official report. Mr. Moss had carefully kept his proceedings to himself, not taking into his confidence even the partner of his bosom, whose animadversions were therefore in reality quite as much the outcome of pure gossip as other people's. He had been regarded in the infected district as only "one of the surveying people," and his share in the matter being just the one thing which it was of most consequence to Buller to know, was naturally the one thing of which no hint ever reached him; so he built up his contemplated course of action on the hypothesis that the financial side of the question would still, as ever, keep Moss on his side within the walls of the council-room, whatever might happen outside.

It was evident the next meeting of the town council would be an animated one; that some considerable display of public spirit on the part of the corporation might be expected. That is to say, recent events, in the shape of grave dereliction from the law of charity on the part of an ill-disposed laundress, had brought home to the perceptions of the more virtuous parts of the community the fact that infectious disorders, if allowed to thrive unmolested amidst the low districts of the town, might possibly ungratefully requite the indulgence by

spreading to more exalted regions. The result of this discovery was naturally a sudden quickening, in those higher regions, of a sense of moral responsibility with regard to the social well-being of the poorer classes of the community, which seemed likely to manifest itself in a favourable leaning, on the part of the corporation, towards those measures of sanitary reform which had heretofore been the objects of their steady and persistent resistance.

The meeting was finally fixed to take place two days before the day of the races. Mr. Dyson had been anxious it should be held on the race day. He was a rigid dissenter, and trusted thereby that some erring brethren might be held back from the sin of mixing in such worldly doings. Also, the race day being a general holiday, rendered absence from business a matter of less commercial importance; but he was overruled by the more ungodly element of the corporation. The special object of the meeting was stated in the summonses to be—to hear the report of the health officer on the state of the town drainage, and to consider what measures for improvement were necessary on the part of the town council.

There was a full attendance, and a look of being very much in earnest on the part of the majority of the council men. Mr. Octavius Buller, a model of unimpeachable tailoring, entered the board-room, just as the town clock was on the stroke of the appointed hour, commanding attention by his most portentous straddle, and his most self-asserting tone, as he said good afternoon to a fellow-council-man, who was standing in the doorway; but for all that he was not quite at his ease. He detected, or

thought he detected, a slight stiffness in the manner of some of his acquaintance, and most unquestionably his debtor, Mr. Harrison, was engaged in deep and earnest discussion with Mr. Moss on the steps leading up to the town hall. There, too, was Smithson, not, as of yore, greeting him with obsequious deference, but chatting with one man and another, with an air of jaunty independence, and saluting him with careless familiarity. He felt himself sinking, and was fain to keep himself afloat by talking in his loudest tones to Mr. Daniels about Mostyn's mare, "Cleopatra," which he had been looking at the previous day in the stables at Ripley, and which he wouldn't advise any man to back for the Duke's cup; and which he had told Tollmache he believed his clever little thorough-bred "Dandy" could lick into fits, in the middle of which harangue the mayor entered, and the proceedings began.

Mr. Buller could not but admit, as Smithson read his report, that the latter had in no way allowed any private feelings to influence his official utterances. There was naught set down in malice, if naught extenuated. His report was as cold, dry, and business-like as any such document could possibly be, but it was quite sufficiently damnatory, all the more so, perhaps, from its total absence of all colouring matter. There was an ominous pause when the reading of the report was ended. Then Mr. Collier, who did not own a square inch of land in the town, got up, and said that, in his opinion, the report just laid before the council was a most important one, distinctly showing that while a great outcry had been made about the duty of the corpo-

ration in this matter, a very large share of blame for the wretched state of the drainage was due to the negligence or cupidity of ground landlords; and he darted venomous glances at both Buller and Moss as he spoke.

"But, my dear Collier," interposed the mayor, with a laudable effort to prevent the discussion from drifting off into the explosive region of acrimonious personalities, "we are not met to discuss the shortcomings of private individuals, but to decide what steps we, as a corporate body, are bound to take in this matter. Of course, if we resolve on laying out money in improving the general drainage of the town, we shall take care that all ground landlords are called upon to fulfil their duties also. But there is no need to discuss that matter here."

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor," exclaimed Mr. Roberts, dashing into the discussion, with an evident purpose of applying a match, if possible, to the oil which Mr. Huddlestone was seeking to pour upon the angry waves, "but I must differ from you there. If the corporation are to move in this business, I think it is of the greatest importance that they should be made thoroughly acquainted with every fact which may possibly bear on the case, and I consider the ownership of houses in that district a very important fact in this matter. It is very well to say, in a general way, that ground landlords will be called upon to do their duty. But how are we to be sure that we can get hold of them?"

"The law, Mr. Roberts, will ensure that point," interposed Mr. Collier.

"Yes, sir; that is to say, the law will issue decrees

for which the corporation will have to pay. But, suppose it turns out that some of these ground landlords live five hundred miles away, do you think, then, they'll give themselves much trouble about the decrees of the law on such a point? They'll just do nothing, and leave us to take the first step, quite confident that in such a case we shall see the wisdom of not taking any step at all. I am of opinion that before we pass any resolution on this point, the council ought to be fully informed of the exact particulars of ownership in that district, in order to make sure that we are in a position to enforce the duties of the ground landlords, before the corporation resolve to expend public funds in improvements which may otherwise be rendered useless by the nefarious conduct of private individuals."

"Thank you, Mr. Roberts," said Moss, "I own several houses in that district."

"I can't help it, Mr. Moss. I am speaking as a council-man, not as a private individual."

Buller's heart sank. What was the meaning of this strange conjunction of circumstances? Roberts would only dance to Moss's piping. He would never have said so much without some secret understanding between them. They were evidently bent upon dragging to light the defalcations of the ground landlords; a dim suspicion of the truth began to dawn upon Mr. Buller, and he muttered between his clenched teeth,—

"The viper!"

"Quite right," replied Mr. Moss, smiling blandly upon his fellow-council-man; "and as far as I am concerned, I can only say that since our last meeting I

have learned a great deal—a very great deal—and all I have learned, added to the information contained in Mr. Smithson's very admirable report, has quite changed my opinion upon this point. I am satisfied now that it is the duty of the corporation to take instant and decisive steps in this matter. I entirely agree with Mr. Roberts respecting the ground landlords; and, foreseeing that the council would wish to be informed upon this point, I have taken the trouble to have a section of the map containing that district enlarged, and the property of the different owners coloured. You will see, gentlemen, that the colour and name of the owner is marked on the margin. My own colour is blue, a few houses in Dawson Street, not, I fear, in the state they ought to be. I think you mentioned Dawson Street, Mr. Smithson?"

"Yes," replied Smithson, turning to his report; "not satisfactory, but by no means so bad as many other places."

"Well, gentlemen," continued Mr. Moss, "I can only say that, as far as my few houses are concerned, everything possible shall be done immediately. I feel that I have been guilty of negligence in the matter. This is the only reparation I can make, and it shall be made without a moment's loss of time."

With an air of conscious virtue he sat down. Mr. Roberts drew the map towards him, and closely examined it.

"River Row," he said; "I think that is the place where you found the houses in the worst condition,—is it not, Mr. Smithson?"

"Yes. The state of things there is very bad indeed."

"Ah, nearly all River Row is red."

Another council-man ran his eye down the margin. "Red, Mr. Octavius Buller!"

"River Row!" chimed in Mr. Harrison, darting a defiant glance at his creditor. "Why, that's where that poor woman, the laundress, lived that there's been such a talk about, who lost nearly all her children with scarlet fever."

"Yes; a tenant of yours, Mr. Buller, I think!" said Moss, with a honied smile.

Mr. Octavius Buller turned white, and glared at his fellow councilmen like a wild cat at bay. This was smiting him hip and thigh with a vengeance. Had the situation had no meaning beyond that which was patent on its surface, all would have been well. He would have followed Moss's lead,—confessed his faults, and promised amendment. But the actual case was far otherwise. He felt, rather than knew, that everyone of these men seated round the board-room table had heard of his conduct respecting the Parkers. A trumpet voice seemed to be proclaming aloud the unspoken words—"See the cause of his persecution of these unfortunate people! He first, by his iniquitous conduct as a landlord, brings all this trouble upon them, and then persecutes them, in hope to drive them away, and prevent his misdeeds coming to light. This is the man who is mainly responsible for evils, the existence of which has been laid to the account of the corporation!"

It was all a plot! He saw it all. An infamous plot of Moss's, concocted and carried out without

a suspicion on his own part being aroused. Smithson's release, and sudden activity; Roberts acting as Moss's spokesman, with a clever feint of throwing blame on his principal; Harrison's insolent bravado; it was all a part of Moss's plot to damage his character, with a view to the coming election. To further his object, Moss was even ready to risk the chance of municipal expenditure upon the drainage.

Desperation, however, gave Mr. Buller courage. There was nothing for it but to put a bold face on the matter, and make the best of it.

"Yes," he said, "I regret to say they were tenants of mine, but they have ceased to be. The state of their house is mainly due to their own dirty habits. In fact," he continued, a sudden inspiration revealing to him a means of escaping from the worst points of his position, "those houses all need the utmost care on the part of the tenants to keep the drains in decent order. They are radically defective in principle. The property did not come into my hands until after the houses were built, so it is only by degrees I have become aware of the real state of the case. They are miserably built houses. Critchett was saying to me, only a short time since, he believed they would all tumble down some day. I have been considering for some time by what possible means they could be improved with respect to drainage but have never yet been able to hit upon any feasible plan. It is easy enough," and he glanced round with a slightly patronising smile, "for non-professional people to raise an outcry about ground landlords; but we professional men know very well that defects of this sort are sometimes by no means easy

to remedy. My good friend, Mr. Moss, there, after an attempt or two upon his houses in Dawson Street, will probably be a wiser and a sadder man; and the elevation of Dawson Street makes the matter much simpler than in River Row. If, however, the corporation resolve to move in the matter, alterations in the main drain may probably decrease our difficulties."

"Of all the liars!" muttered Mr. Moss to Mr. Roberts, aghast at the dexterity with which his foe had parried his attack. "Tapps built those houses for him, and one chief cause of his bankruptcy was the rascally way Buller behaved to him."

"He ought to be turned out of the corporation," responded Mr. Roberts, in the same under tone, and both men looked righteous indignation at the sinner, neither having sufficient breadth of view to appreciate that branch of the wisdom of the children of this world which consists in adroit use of a faculty for lying, when, as in the present case, it made for the advantage of an adversary.

Mr. Huddlestone could not but smile to see his own prophecies respecting the possible results of the churchwarden contest thus prematurely fulfilled. But again he interposed on behalf of peace and business.

"This is all very well, gentlemen; but we are not making way. Mr. Moss, it appears, has kindly supplied the information desired. I think this section of our map distinctly shows that none of the ground landlords with whom the corporation may be required to deal, are beyond our reach. There appears, therefore, to be no reason why we should not at once proceed to consider what steps we ought to take

respecting the main drainage system of the town. As I am not a professional man, Mr. Buller, I suppose I should speak with diffidence, but I imagine the chief difficulty with which we have to contend is the flatness of the ground immediately adjoining the river?"

"Exactly, sir," answered Mr. Smithson. "That is the very point which Porter noticed, when surveying with me, as being the great difficulty to be overcome."

"Then I think the matter should at once be made over to an engineer, that he may advise us what we *can* do, and what we had *better* do."

"Certainly!"—"Undoubtedly!"—"The best possible course!"—Quite a little murmur of approval passed round the table. The whole proceedings had suddenly become flat and uninteresting. Moss was acquiescent, Buller paralysed, so all the rest were quiescent; and the great drainage difficulty, which had disturbed the peace of the council for some years, seemed likely enough to perish out of hand, shrivelled up in the heat generated in the moral atmosphere by the explosion of some of the combustible material amply stored up on both sides for the great coming struggle.

Mr. Buller, after some highly politic fidgeting, and frequent glancing at the clock, rose and made as hasty an exit as was consistent with his dignity, the moment the proceedings were ended, pleading an important business engagement. The mayor also disappeared with much celerity, having little taste for the society of the town council when it ceased to be a council, and resolved itself into a somewhat rancorous collection of component units. The rest

lingered, holding unofficial sub-councils in twos and threes, about the room; all sufficiently filled with public spirited indignation against Buller to inspire the heart of Mr. Moss with rejoicing confidence.

"If that rascal isn't done clean out of all chance of the churchwardenship," he said that night to Mrs. Moss, in border-land confidences, "I'll pay a sovereign for every vote he gets. Yet, after all, I don't know that it's worth the cost. It'll cost me a pretty penny. I expect I'll have to advance that poor devil Harrison the money to pay off Buller."

"Never mind that," replied his loyal consort; "you've done your duty by the town."

"Oh yes, certainly; that's a great point." And Mr. Moss felt extremely virtuous, if not greatly consoled. "I'd give something to know, though," he added, "how Smithson got out of the scrape. I'm as certain that he owed Buller a lot of money as I am that I'm standing here."

"Perhaps Buller cancelled the debt, as a bribe to Smithson to let him off easy."

"Precious little he made by that move, then! No, that's not it. Smithson looked a deal too easy and independent. Some one has paid that money, and I'll find out who, one way or another." And Mr. Moss prepared himself for slumber, revolving the best means for procuring the information for which he pined; and which, as bearing upon the actions of an official in the employment of the corporation, he felt it only right should be in the hands of an influential member of that important body.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. WYCHERLEY DOES NOT BACK CLEOPATRA.

MR. OCTAVIUS BULLER by no means admitted to himself that he had overreached himself; such an admission would have been wholly inconsistent with the very essence of his nature. Human beings in general belong to one or other of two classes—the one sublimely free from all doubt respecting the infallible wisdom of their own actions, the other perpetually haunted by a tormenting dread that they are always wrong, or likely to be wrong; the small minority who possess both weights by which to measure, and scales in which to measure, being a very minute fraction of humanity. Mr. Buller certainly belonged to the first-mentioned class, consequently in his present untoward condition he merely cursed circumstances as "deucedly unlucky," and his rival as a "sneaking scoundrel;" and looked upon himself as an unfortunate sufferer from a fellow-townsman's rascality.

It was very clear to him that now the small minority of the corporation who favoured sanitary reform

had everything in their own hands. Some measures would certainly be taken officially to improve the drainage system of the town, therefore the only course open to him was at once to remedy the existing evils in his own houses, regardless of the cost. If substantial excellence could shortly be pointed out as the characteristic of his property in this respect, it would do much, by its silent testimony, to discredit the aspersions now being heaped upon his injured head. In fact, Mr. Buller was not without hope that he might yet figure as a cruelly-calumniated individual, unjustly charged with sins for which other people were really responsible, and for which he had been forced to make vicarious atonement, at heavy cost to himself. Judging by the marvellous vitality and abundant fruitfulness of falsehood in general, his hope was probably a well-founded one.

The gregarious habits of misfortunes are not unvariable. Good luck sometimes takes a freak of enticing away one of the herd, and wandering about in close proximity therewith; and though Mr. Buller did not at once recognise her smiling face, good luck met him on the very evening of that disastrous day, not a hundred yards from his own door, in the shape of Mr. Mostyn's head groom, in the communicative state of intoxication. Mr. Buller having been architecturally employed about Ripley Lodge, the man knew him, and stopped him, in spite of his efforts to pass unnoticed.

"Good evening, Mr. Buller," he said, swaying vaguely on the curbstone, as he raised his hand to his hat. "Fine weather, sir—course 'll be in good order on Wednesday—"

"I hope so, Jennings, I'm sure. How's Cleopatra coming on?"

The man looked at him for a moment, with that air of cunning solemnity which only a half-tipsy man can assume, and then coming close up to him he laid a hand upon his shoulder, and said, in an impressive tone,—

"Mr. Buller, sir, I look upon you as a friend; therefore, sir, I treat you with confidence. I'd do anything for a friend, sir. Think what a friend is! It's a great thing in this world to have a friend, Mr. Buller."

"Undoubtedly, Jennings. But what has that to do with Cleopatra?"

"Mr. Buller, sir, friendship, at this moment, between you and me, has much to do with Cleopatra, Mr. Buller," and he sank his voice to an ominous whisper, "don't you back Cleopatra."

Mr. Buller had not the least intention of risking his money on any such shaky investment; but he was curious to know what was the drift of his half-intoxicated companion's ideas, so he responded,—

"Ah, indeed! Why not Jennings? I understood she was heavily backed; quite the favourite, in fact."

"Yes, Mr. Buller, she is the favourite, and deservedly so, sir. A better mare, or with more staying power, was never crossed. But not now—not now—Mr. Buller." And he shook his head solemnly, and wiped away a tear.

"And why not now?" asked Mr. Buller, with difficulty repressing a smile.

"Because, sir, she hasn't a chance for this race. There are reasons, sir."

"Reasons! Why you don't mean, Jennings, that she's been tampered with?"

"Mr. Buller, sir, the mare is under my charge. There are parties, sir, who are above bribery, or any rascality. But accidents, sir—accidents will happen sometimes in even the best-ordered stables."

"Has Cleopatra had an accident?"

"She has, Mr. Buller—not a serious one—not one to show—so it's all being kept quiet. But you are a friend, Mr. Buller. Cleopatra, sir, has slipped up—in the stable, sir, and is shaken,—her nerves is shaken. Them high-bred creatures is all nerves. Mr. Buller, don't back Cleopatra, she won't stay. She'll go all to pieces, sir, before she's three-parts round the course. Mr. Buller, you're a friend! I've risked my place to serve you, sir. Good night!"

Mr. Buller watched the man's devious course along the pavement for some moments, and then turned on his way with a laugh. "You'll risk your place to some purpose, my friend, if you meet many more acquaintances to-night," he said to himself, and then he dismissed the subject from his thoughts. He was not the man to disturb himself, because another man was in imminent peril of total ruin, so long as no fragment of that ruin was likely to touch himself; and, at the moment, he had no suspicion that in the shape of Mr. Mostyn's half-intoxicated head groom a *deus ex machina* had come to him to further his designs.

Rose Playfair started up from feverish slumbers early on the morning of the race day, and springing out of bed rushed with a beating heart to the window, and drew up the blind. It was a lovely morning, the sun shining brightly, and the sky

wearing a settled look, most soothing to the breasts on which lace, feathers, and gossamer fabrics lay heavy. She could hardly eat her breakfast, and could do nothing afterwards save wander restlessly about, wondering if the clock would ever proclaim that it was time for her to go and dress. George was to call for her, and take her to The Hall, where she was to join Mrs. Huddlestone and her party.

"What! going up to dress already, Rose?" her father said, meeting her on the stairs, about an hour and a-half before the appointed time for her being in readiness.

"Yes, papa," she answered, striving her utmost to look quite unconcerned. I don't want to be hurried, it makes one so hot; and if my things are not all quite right I shall have time to see to them."

They proved to be all right, as she might very well know that they were, considering the frequency with which they had been inspected; and full half-an-hour before the time George was expected she was ready, and waiting in a state of high satisfaction, feeling, it is true, a vague sensation of being choked and stifled, and a general sense of entanglement, but happily convinced that her appearance was everything that could be desired, whatever her feelings might be.

George arrived punctually to the moment, in his mother's handsome carriage, and bringing her a beautiful bouquet. He was so well brushed and smartened up that, by contrast, he looked quite resplendent; and a few stray passers-by stopped to watch her conveying all her magnificence into the carriage, and she almost fancied she felt like a bride

already; only she wished nurse would not let little Edith lean out of the nursery window, with ruffled hair and a dirty pinafore, and scream "Good-bye, Rose!" at the top of her voice.

They were on the course, and in their places, in good time, so she had plenty of leisure to watch the scene around her; but she had eyes alone for the sacred region, carefully partitioned off, where the Olympians could appear without being too closely associated with the vulgar herd. Of course they had not gathered in full force so early, but they were hovering about, now dimly seen through the lace curtains which hung over the entrance to the luncheon room, now coming out for a moment to gaze at the vulgar throng, or taking little strolls, in groups of threes and fours, across the common. At last they begun to troop in, and in a few minutes, amidst much stir and commotion, the train of carriages from Wyvern Abbey came sweeping up; and His Serene Highness was duly unpacked, and presented before the eyes of the admiring public, smiling graciously, but not showing to much personal advantage in such close proximity to the magnificent proportions of the stately Duchess.

Then the races began, but Rose felt little interest in them, her whole attention was absorbed by the splendours so close at hand. How beautifully they were all dressed, and how bright and smiling they all looked! How handsome the men were, and how exquisitely their coats fitted! What an atmosphere of easy, graceful refinement seemed to float around the sacred precincts! And how delightful it must be to have all this luxury and splendour surrounding

every hour of your life! How thoroughly in keeping with everything around even the most splendid costume there would look in Miss Tollmache's dressing-room! And then Rose glanced down at her own folds and flutings, thought of the shabby scantily-furnished bedroom she shared with Alice, and felt that her life was not altogether harmonious.

Poor little Rose! could she but have looked a little deeper, what an evil world would not this have seemed to her when so much of dull care, pale anxiety, or sharp pain lurked behind so many of those sparkling smiles? Miss Tollmache, resignedly bored, was murmuring with a hardly suppressed yawn to Lady Julia Fane, "How tiresome it is, Ju! Don't you wish we were having tea in my dressing-room?" The Duke was in agonies of perplexity, vainly endeavouring to understand the strange jargon which His Serene Highness would talk, under the impression he was speaking English, while he steadily resisted all efforts to entice him into the safe paths of French. The Duchess was suffering torture from a terrible attack of that most sturdy communist pain, which hurt her just as much under the imposing title of neuralgia, as it would have hurt her scullery maid under the name of faceache. Lady Jarvis was furious because Colonel Twyford, enraged at Miss Tollmache's evident unconsciousness of his presence, had walked away across the common with Mr. Mostyn, while other eligible men were hanging still round the intractable heiress. The younger Olympians had their own griefs and trials, and, finally, His Serene Highness was periodi-

cally making every one uncomfortable, by always wanting to go into the luncheon room at the most inconvenient moment. So all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and probably, after all, the town people had the best of it.

"Now, Rose, this is the grand race of the day," George said to her, as the course was cleared once more. "The Duke's cup. There they go. That's the favourite, the bay, second. Mr. Mostyn's Cleopatra."

Rose watched the race with languid attention. But such a mighty hubbub arose as the horses came in, that she asked with some interest what had happened.

"Only that Cleopatra is nowhere, and they're all sold."

Rose did not understand, and did not very much care. She could not see why it should make much difference which horse won. She was beginning to feel a little bored, and to think the races were rather stupid. She yawned, began to feel it hot and dusty, and to wish she was going to the county ball next week. Then, gazing listlessly about, her eyes suddenly fell upon a most unexpected apparition—Mr. Wycherley, walking slowly along in front of the stand, in company and earnest conversation with Mr. Octavius Buller!

Mr. Buller had come up to the common with no very ardent interest in what was going forward. He was not a sporting man, he did not derive much gratification from a race meeting, neither was it a likely scene for advantageous business transactions, at least under normal circumstances; but Mr. Buller,

for once, found circumstances abnormal, and recognised his *deus ex machina* with the promptness and acuteness which usually characterised the workings of his brain when his own interests were in question. He was watching with some amusement some futile attempts at a start, in one of the minor races, when he felt a touch on his shoulder, and turning, found himself face to face with his quondam acquaintance, Mr. Jennings, who beckoned him aside, with a pale and anxious countenance.

"What's the matter, Jennings?" he asked. "Cleopatra come to grief again?"

"Hush, for the love of Heaven, Mr. Buller. I was afraid I'd said something last night. For God's sake, sir, don't say a word! You'll ruin me!"

"Don't be frightened, man. I'll do you no harm," replied Mr. Buller, who truly would not have wantonly injured the meanest animal. "But it is true, then?"

"As true as I'm alive, sir; but I ought never to have breathed a word of it. It was all that cursed drink. She took a fit of tantrums; she has a devil of a temper, and contrived to slip up. She looks all right, but she's fit for nothing; she'll smash up before she's half round the course. And Mr. Mostyn knows it. Thank Heaven! I believe I said nothing to any one but you, sir. I believe he'd murder me if he knew."

"Make your mind quite easy," Mr. Buller replied, and sauntered away, thinking what fools men were. He never drank too much himself, save under perfectly safe conditions, and wondered these idiots had not the sense to be as cautious.

A little further on he came upon a knot of men in animated discussion. The Duke's younger sons, and a few others, who had fled from the oppressive atmosphere of royalty, to smoke their cigars in peace among the unharnessed carriages. Among them was Mr. Wycherley, and as Mr. Buller slowly passed he heard one of the others address some question to him, which he did not catch. Mr. Wycherley's answer was, however, quite audible.

"Not yet. I'm going to back Cleopatra heavily. There's not a horse on the ground has a chance against her, if she gets fair play; and that's guaranteed by the fact that Harwood rides her."

Mr. Buller heard no more, but he had heard quite enough. His active brain at once took in the fact that fate had cast in his way a chance of introducing himself to the very man whose acquaintance he most wished to make. He retired to a short distance, and seating himself on a carriage wheel, watched for his opportunity.

Presently the party of smokers began to disperse, and in a few moments Mr. Buller saw Mr. Wycherley move away alone. Instantly he pounced upon his game, and approaching the young man with his most urbane manner, requested leave to speak to him.

"Who are you? and what do you want?" Mr. Wycherley asked, rather sharply, eyeing him with the suspicion which considerable acquaintance with the world had taught him to entertain towards courteous and well-dressed strangers who accosted him with much deferential civility on race courses.

"My name, sir, is Buller, Octavius Buller. I am a

resident in Monksford, where I carry on the professional avocations of an architect. Your steward, Mr. Haigg, knows me well. My object in venturing to address you, sir, is to ask you to allow me to say a few words to you, out of earshot."

Mr. Wycherley hesitated, still eyeing him doubtfully.

"I accidently heard you, sir, announce just now your intention of backing a certain horse. I am not a sporting man, Mr. Wycherley, but I think on that point I can give you some information which may be valuable to you."

"Come this way then," Mr. Wycherley said, with a look of some surprise; and he led the way to the back of the grand stand.

"Now what have you to say?" he asked.

"Only this, Mr. Wycherley, on no account back Mr. Mostyn's mare, Cleopatra."

"Why not?"

"She has not a chance."

Mr. Wycherley looked at him somewhat scornfully. "I have no doubt, Mr. Buller, you may be an excellent architect, but I fear you do not understand horses."

"I do not, sir. I make no profession of being a good judge of a horse; still, I should have judged most favourably of Cleopatra's chance to-day, but for facts of which I am aware."

"What facts? You don't mean to tell me there is a chance of foul play?"

"Certainly not. I cast no aspersions on anyone. I merely tell you that, to my certain knowledge, Cleopatra has met with a slight accident—too

slight to show in any way, but just sufficient to give her nerves a shaking, and ruin her chances for to-day."

Mr. Wycherley looked sharply at him. "How came you to know that?"

"That, Mr. Wycherley, I cannot state."

"How am I to know that you are not humbugging me? Why should you take any interest in whether I lose or win?"

"The lord of the Wycherley manor, sir, is looked upon with interest by all the inhabitants of Monksford. There are people still living in the town who can remember your great grandfather, the handsomest gentleman of his day, I have heard say. Any one in Monksford would be pleased to be of any service to a Wycherley."

"Well, upon my word, if what you tell me be true, you have done me a very great service."

"If you will ask any of the gentlemen about, sir, I think they will assure you you may depend upon information coming from me."

"Good. If Cleopatra loses, meet me here again just after the race."

With that they parted, and Mr. Wycherley straightway sought his host.

"Sir Myles," he said, "do you know anything of a man in Monksford named Buller—an architect?"

"Architect, house agent, surveyor, and what not—yes, I know the fellow."

"Is he to be trusted?"

"That depends upon how you mean the question?"

"He has just given me some information of some consequence to me. Is it likely to be correct?"

"Does it in anyway concern his own interests?"

"No, I should think not."

"Then I should think it is probably correct. But of this you may be sure, if Buller has done you a favour, you'll have to pay back the principal, with heavy interest, one of these days."

"Shall I? We shall see," he replied, laughing. "I've signed nothing on the transaction."

"You won't get off."

Mr. Wycherley relinquished his intention of backing Cleopatra, and watched with some interest to see what would happen. He almost believed he had been made a fool of when the mare came out, so splendid was her appearance. He thought so still more when he saw her start; she went away so easily, and settled down to her work so well and steadily. He was on the point of bestowing a hearty curse on Mr. Buller, for his funds were low at the moment, when the words were arrested almost on his lips by a sudden change in the mare. It was even as had been foretold. She ran finely for the first half of the race, and then broke up suddenly, and so hopelessly, that it needed all her jockey's skill to ensure her even a creditable position at the finish.

The result was so entirely unexpected that the uproar was great, and in the midst of the confusion Mr. Wycherley slipped away to the back of the stand, where he found Mr. Buller calmly waiting. Mr. Wycherley had been saved from the loss of some hundreds at a moment, when such a loss would have been almost irretrievable. His greeting of Mr. Buller was coloured by that fact. He held out his hand most cordially.

"Mr. Buller," he said, "you have done me a very great service."

"And you are convinced of my rectitude, sir? I must only beg, Mr. Wycherley, that you will kindly be silent respecting this transaction. I owe my information to a little indiscretion on the part of a highly respectable person, who might suffer did any suspicion arise of what has occurred, you will therefore understand the motives of my wish for secrecy. It is a great pleasure to me to have been of any service to you."

Of course the least that Mr. Wycherley could do was to offer his benefactor some refreshment. He did not much care for the companionship, but he consoled himself with the reflection that on a race-course men are apt to be seen in strange company; and it was on their way to the refreshment room that they passed close in front of Rose Playair. Mr. Wycherley's eyes, glancing carelessly over the well-filled stand, swept across her, and then came quickly back to her face with a sudden look of recognition. Rose, colouring vividly, made, almost involuntarily, a slight motion of her head. Mr. Wycherley raised his hat and passed. George Huddlestone looked round at Rose with a glance of no uneasy jealousy, but rather of a little surprise.

"I did not know you knew Mr. Wycherley, Rose?" he said.

"I'm not sure that I do, George," she answered, colouring still more. "I am not sure that I ought to have noticed him; but I did it involuntarily. He met us riding that day, you know, with Miss Tollmache; and one evening afterwards he passed

along the lane when I was walking round the paddock, and he asked me to direct him about a road he did not know. He knows who I am. That is all I know about him."

"Not a dangerous amount of acquaintance!"

"Do you think much acquaintance would be dangerous?" she asked, with a mischievous half coquettish smile.

"Not to you, I hope. But I should not like you to have any intimate acquaintance with Mr. Wycherley. He is a man I should not care to see about my house."

Here was a grevious downfall of airy castles! Rose felt a trifle disposed to be sulky. She fancied the words sounded as though George were inclined to dictate already, and a rebellious feeling sprang up within her immediately. She was fully resolved to make an excellent wife, as far as excellence was represented by being always affectionate, bright, and pretty, well-dressed, and presiding over a handsomely furnished house, and beautifully appointed table, with cordial gracious hospitality towards all George's friends. But for that phase of matrimonial excellence which consisted in submission to her husband's wishes in the matter of associates, she had no strongly developed inclination. She regarded matrimony as a sort of guarantee of chartered freedom in this respect. She would of course be careful not to compromise her dignity as a married woman in any way; but she by no means relished the idea of merely exchanging the supervision of her mother for a like supervision on the part of a husband.

"He is very handsome," she said, pouting a little.

"Yes; but too much of the Adonis by half, and a very dissipated man."

"Miss Tollmache knows him."

George laughed.

"Yes; by her reception of him the other day, I should say she did."

"Well, I am sure nothing could be more gentleman-like than the way he spoke to me in the lane."

George looked at her in some little surprise. There was an unmistakable petulant impatience in the tone, which, knowing nothing of what had been passing in her thoughts, he could not account for, and which he consequently laid to a wrong cause.

"My dear Rose, I had no intention of blaming you. There is no harm in your knowing Mr. Wycherley so far, only don't encourage him, my pet. He is not a safe man for any girl to have much acquaintance with."

Rose made no reply, but she felt very cross, and she was not very sorry when, soon afterwards, George left her to join some friends who were strolling about the common.

Mr. Wycherley meanwhile was, as he conceived, discharging his obligation to Mr. Buller, first, by being seen walking with him; second, by drinking a glass of wine with him, under the stimulus of which refreshment, added to a fair amount of previous attention to the Duke of Bermondsey's champagne, he became, though far from so incautious as Mr. Mostyn's head groom, still, more loquacious than under the circumstances he would ordinarily have been.

"Really, Mr. Buller," he said, tossing off a second glass of sherry, "I am immensely indebted to you. I should certainly have backed that mare but for your timely hint, and it would have been most deucedly inconvenient to have lost just now. It is astonishing how expensive life is, even if you don't keep up any great establishment."

"No doubt, sir. Still, I think, Mr. Wycherley, I know a good many gentlemen who would think themselves precious lucky if they had the revenues of the Wycherley estate on which to lead a bachelor life."

"And an infernal lot they know about it."

"Well, of course, everyone who has ever seen the county rental list knows what the rental of the property is."

"Yes. But not what mortgages are on it."

A shiver ran all through Mr. Buller. This was news indeed, news which he had never dreamed of picking up by wasting a few hours on a race course. The Wycherley property mortgaged? To whom? For how much? He thirsted with feverish thirst for more information, but it behoved him to be very cautious.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Wycherley," he replied, with air of deprecating all impertinent inquiry into his affairs, "I was not aware the estate was mortgaged."

"Of course it is. I don't say ruinously; but it is mortgaged. And they charge such confoundedly high interest, that it cuts a good slice out of the income, I can tell you. Upon my honour, it's lucky I've got a tenant for the place."

"I fear you have not fallen into very good hands, Mr. Wycherley. With such excellent security, the interest on a mortgage ought not to be high. I arranged one on very moderate terms for a gentleman in this county not long since."

"Good. When I want another I will apply to you."

"I am sure I hope you may not require any such assistance, Mr. Wycherley; but, should you do so, I should be glad to be of any service to you. You will perhaps allow me to give you my card. I am pretty well known to have extensive dealings with gentlemen of position in this part of the country, so business friends often drop me a line just to say, 'Find me a good investment on mortgage, Buller, for such a sum; your dealings are always safe, so moderate interest will do.' I have been able to accommodate many gentlemen."

"Upon my honour, you are a most useful man," said Mr. Wycherley, pocketing the proffered card with a dubious smile, which Mr. Buller did not quite understand. He felt it safe, however, to take the words in their simple, outward meaning.

"I trust so. There is so much rascality practised under the name of business, Mr. Wycherley, so much more than a gentleman in your position can possibly conceive, that I imagine it must always be a pleasure to any honest business-man to arrange really *bona fide* transactions. I will wish you good afternoon now, sir. I am much indebted for your kind hospitality."

Mr. Buller made his exit in his very best manner. Mr. Wycherley kept his seat for a little longer time, then rising, he muttered to himself,—

"A vulgar brute, but he might be useful. And now for the little charmer."

With these words he walked slowly back towards the grand stand, lounging up to the barrier a few moments after George's departure. Nearly in front of Rose he took up his position, leaning against the barrier, and chatting from time to time with one acquaintance or another who passed, while he cast occasional furtive but expressive glances in her direction.

The day became bright again, the races charming, and every thing roseate-hued to poor little Rose. Mr. Wycherley might be dissipated, he might be a thoroughly bad man; still he was quite a gentleman, accustomed to the highest society, both at home and abroad. It was certainly a compliment to be admired by him, and it could not do any harm to any one: and filled with a flattering sense of her own consequent importance, accompanied by a pleasant feeling that, after all, perhaps there was something to be said on the opposite side of some stinging remarks, which had of course been duly reported to her, respecting the wholly one-sided advantages of a marriage between the portionless daughter of a country town doctor and the only son of a wealthy mayor, she bestowed one or two certainly not repellant glances on Mr. Wycherley.

There was, soon after, a general stir, announcing the approaching exodus of the Olympians. Mr. Wycherley hastily retired, and she saw him faithfully discharging his obligations by careful attendance upon Lady Jarvis and her daughters, who had to pass close in front of her, on the way to their car-

riage. Rose contrasted the Jarvis complexions and hair with her own, and smiled a pleased little smile as she heard some one near her remark, "How faded those two Miss Jarvises look!"

Then in a few moments Mrs. Huddlestone told her they were going, and she rose, and gathering up all her adornments in a heap, followed as best she could through the struggling crowd, all striving, according to the universal custom of the free and independent Briton, to get through a rather narrow entrance at the same moment.

Rose had just fought through the gallantly contested pass, and was shaking herself out a trifle in the open space beyond, where they stood to wait till George could get the carriage brought up, when she felt a light touch upon her arm. She turned, and saw to her no small surprise that it came from a groom in livery, who slipping a little note into her hand, hastily retreated, without saying a word.

Rose Playfair was not used to such tactics. She looked in astonishment, first after the man, and then at the note in her hand. It was merely a carelessly twisted up strip of paper, addressed in pencil "Miss Playfair. Private." All in a moment a sudden flash of perception came over her. She flushed crimson, and hurriedly stuffed the note into the most convenient adjacent pocket, as George returned to say the carriage would be up in a moment.

END OF VOL. I.